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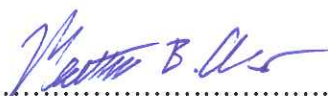

Antinomies of a Commercial Age: Adam Ferguson on the Moral and Political
Tensions of Early-Capitalism

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Declaration

I composed this thesis, the work is my own. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

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Thesis Abstract

This dissertation seeks to clarify the moral and political shape of economic exchange with an intellectual history of capitalism at its eighteenth-century inception. It seeks to avoid the familiar polarities of Marxist and capitalist economic ideologies by framing the ethical questions of economic exchange in historical terms: Why does the modern economic order seem to create moral contradictions and undermine political institutions? In response to this question, the thesis recovers the contributions of the Scottish historian and moral philosopher, Adam Ferguson (1723-1816). Because modern economy had not yet taken on its modern abstraction and was still a thinkable reality, Ferguson's treatment on history, action, and political institutions provide a fertile starting point for envisaging a distinctly moral configuration of the economic sphere. He prepares ground for a critical assessment of the political and economic relationship by criticizing the ideal of progress and emphasizing the need for dignified human exertion. His claim is that the liberalized marketplace undermines political institutions—especially law—to the extent that it leaves a people enslaved both to their own dependencies, as well as to other nations for whom commercial luxury is not a vice. My argument carries Ferguson's claim forward by asserting that the Market itself now tyrannizes and enslaves in much the way Ferguson imagined a military despot would tyrannize unprepared societies of the eighteenth-century. Eighteenth-century theology is, in many respects, a period of relative theological austerity; so it is therefore unsurprising that a morally confused political instrument (capitalism) would emerge in an age largely devoid of theological imagination or conscience. Jesus Christ is no longer the origin, end, or meaning of history; co-creation is no longer the principal object of human action or labour; and the means of Christ's rule through the political order are rejected in favour of luxuries and conveniences of modern commerce. The marketplace now embodies all the fears eighteenth-century theorists reserved for despots, tyrannizing western societies and threatening the resolve of already fractured political institutions.

Introduction

They speak of human pursuits as if the whole difficulty were to find something to do: They fix on some frivolous occupation as if there was nothing that deserved to be done: They consider what tends to the good of their fellow-creatures as a disadvantage to themselves: They fly from every scene in which any efforts of vigour are required or in which they might be allured to perform any service to their country. We misapply our compassion in pitying the poor; it were much more justly applied to the rich, who become the first victims of that wretched insignificance into which the members of every corrupted state, by the tendency of their weaknesses and their vices, are in haste to plunge themselves.¹

-- Adam Ferguson on the 'Corruption Incident to Polished Nations'

'They,' 'they,' 'they,' 'they.' Adam Ferguson's ardent repetition raises the natural question of just *who* 'they' might be. His conclusion at the end of the passage offers a clue, of course, but the reader of Ferguson's *Essay* will by this point have already known who the 'they' are. Ferguson's concerns have been made plain; the 'rich' are identified explicitly as those citizens who seek actively to forsake political (especially martial) participation in favour of opulent passivity. He has in mind, perhaps, the polished gentry who wish to flaunt publicly the true extent of their private leisure. Yet his criticism of the indolent and bored seems to apply even more broadly and appositely as it extends across the centuries between his time and ours. Presently, 'they' could represent almost anyone, regardless of wealth. The rhetorical humour of Ferguson's colourful pronouncement is a fruit of its prophetic truthfulness. His frustration imparts wisdom late-moderns can readily identify, and thus we glimpse here a flicker of what is to come, both for our inquiry into Ferguson's moral and political thought-world, as well as for his pronouncements upon modern commercial society. The 'they' he chastises as pitiable may in many respects include late-modern societies within that broad third-person plural!

This particular example captures the wider, more generic aim of the essays that follow: to work our way conceptually inside Ferguson's mind and allow his insights

¹ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, F. Oz-Salzberger ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 246.

to illumine perennial questions. Opening widely the window to his mind we will want to note the arrangement of his intellectual furniture, what it is comprised of and what priorities are revealed by its arrangement. But peering intrusively into this window will not tell us everything about how or why the concepts we find there originally found their place. We also need to know how this room joins up with other rooms, where the house itself is situated, and in what neighbourhood.

For the purposes of this introduction it would be best to start on the wider view and move forward incrementally, contextualizing each step along the way till we reach Ferguson himself. As a means of orientation, the central question this thesis seeks to resolve is as follows: What kinds of moral and political tension did the reorganization of economic goals introduce to early-capitalist societies? Each chapter of this thesis takes a different approach to this question by focusing on Ferguson's dominant theoretical interests—history, action, and political institutions. To understand why the period, place, and people in question merit our attention and to set the stage for the chapters to come it would be useful to take preliminary account of *why* our inquiry has settled on this particular conceptual territory. This introduction affords me opportunity to justify why, exactly, the question has been phrased as it has, why eighteenth-century Scotland is an optimal context for this study, and why, of all people, is Adam Ferguson most appealing. My qualifications begin from a wider view and proceed to the more narrow. If moral and political implications of early capitalist societies are of foremost interest to this inquiry, readers may ask, why focus on a comparatively neglected theorist of eighteenth-century Scotland?

So, first, why eighteenth-century Britain? This particular period of British history is unquestionably among its most distinguished. Intellectually and culturally the nation pulses with enthusiastic expectation. The popular feeling was that the country had made a political and social turn, entering a favoured position historically and a new era of civil liberty; the Glorious Revolution, union of parliaments, and fiscally secure Hanover monarchy achieved over a twenty-year period also doubly reinforced this sense of stability and promise. On an economic plane, stability is the fertile soil in which commercial life is rooted, and promise is the water that continually nourishes it. Stability and promise mutually foster one another in the garden of society. With this growth we find, unsurprisingly, sustained and notably widespread discussion of economic policy. The self-fortifying nature of the stability/promise

duality in the eighteenth-century heralds a shift in the way politics is thought about: from consideration of *governmental* modalities to consideration of politico-economic modalities.

Political thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been largely concentrated on questions of authority, order, and functions of government; now the tide has shifted and weighing most heavily on the mind of eighteenth-century Britons is the authority, order, and function of political economy. Yet it is still reflected upon as a subject of *philosophic* interest. Political economy had not yet been mathematicized and would remain a subject of prudent deliberation, not of quantification. By late century, however, especially after the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, the primacy of philosophy in commercial theory would begin to give way, but not until. That gradual transition was aided by increased acceptance of a Newtonian world-picture. 'Natural' theories and designations enter their ascendancy and eventually subsume the discipline of philosophy itself to pure natural authority. By the mid eighteenth-century 'natural' authority had also become the rubric of political economy, and political economy in turn had become the supreme demonstration of natural authority. This mutual self-justification would have its most significant impact on how the organic relation between private pursuit of wealth and public pursuit of justice was understood. Division between public and private dissolves in the economic sphere and the two are consistently thought to co-mingle; that is, private commercial pursuits are viewed as publicly advantageous, just as public pursuits would be viewed as privately advantageous. Thus, in response to the question of 'why eighteenth-century Britain?' my justifications are threefold—a popular sense of entering a new political era of liberty, a shifting of attention from governmental to politico-economic modalities, and a breakdown of divisions between private pursuit of wealth and public pursuit of justice. Each of these themes will be taken up extensively in the chapters to come.

Interestingly, the ascendancy of natural authority did not at the same time subvert habits of framing political questions in broadly theological terms. In fact, doctrines of providence became the centripetal force of eighteenth-century theology to the extent that each theorist attempted to come to terms with the idea of a God who works within the necessity of a Newtonian world. Natural theology needed natural foundations and natural legitimacy. Nevertheless, one of the overarching concerns in this thesis will be to rebut the popular characterization of the eighteenth-century,

particularly of Britain, as an age of enlightened deism. Isolated figures of prominence, like Samuel Clarke for instance, obviously exhibit certain deistic commitments. But as will be seen in several of the chapters to come, there is no reason to think this the dominant or even popular theological point of view.² Details of that argument will be rehearsed later. For now I wish simply to note that philosophical inquiry of the period retained theological shape and did not altogether jettison its Christian heritage. Arguments were still required to show some degree of theological fidelity, even if the object and method of philosophy had become ‘natural’ and less ‘revealed.’

Having offered a few qualifications for the question of ‘why eighteenth-century Britain?’ it would be useful now to consider the narrower question of ‘why Scotland?’ To begin with, it must be said that I do not mean to include in this question the whole of Scotland, but primarily the university towns of Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. The term ‘vibrant’ is a particularly apt description in this regard, as Scotland had benefited richly from the constitutional changes inaugurated at the century’s turn by the union of parliaments.³ The country had prospered politically and economically under these new constitutional provisions and would lead naturally to an enrichment of philosophical reflection. Of course, Scotland’s philosophical tradition was already of some repute; the new commercial confidence enjoyed at mid-century simply gave this tradition its needed relief and leisure. Naming a few members in this talent pool vividly illustrates the nation’s philosophic eminence: Gershom Carmichael, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Henry Home (Lord Kames), Thomas Reid, George Turnbull, George Campbell,

² Characterization of this century as an age of enlightened deism has been repeated most forcefully by Charles Taylor in both *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Karl Barth intimates similarly in the first chapter of *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972). On a separate track, many intellectual historians have utilized this presumption of latent deism as a sign of democratic replacement of hierarchical structures, whether ecclesial or civil. See, for example, ‘Scepticism, Priestcraft, and Toleration’, in *Cambridge History of Eighteenth Century Political Thought*, M. Goldie and R. Wolker eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). An alternative interpretation of the ‘long eighteenth-century’ I follow closely throughout this thesis is J. C. D. Clark’s meticulous study in *English Society: 1660-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For an example of the deism mentioned above see Samuel Clarke, *The Works*, (New York: Garland Publishing Co.).

³ A brief retelling of the unification story is offered at the end of chapter one.

Hugh Blair, James Beattie, Alexander Gerard, Dugald Stewart, Adam Ferguson, and a host of politicians and armchair intellectuals trained in the humanist arts.⁴

By the 1760's and 70's Scotland had become the epicentre of philosophical engagement and, significantly, almost all the names included in the list above dwelt in Edinburgh at one time or other, some permanently. Edinburgh was *the* place to be for intellectual stimulation.⁵ As a city of much notoriety, achieved through the help of a new constitutional order and political consciousness, Edinburgh serves as an intense microcosm of the period's unique cultural fixtures. Given this cultural activity it is therefore unsurprising that improved economic conditions would lead philosophers to contemplate the nature of political economy itself. How were circumstances once so dire—failed colonial charters, domestic famine, constant threats of rebellion—commercially transformed in less than three decades? Scotland, and Edinburgh in particular, readily became the epicentre for working out how the nation and city became a commercial success story, and its philosophers would interrogate the material causes of commercial growth with matchless ability and breadth. We must not forget, moreover, that these are immensely practical theorists who wish to know why life is lived as it is and how its conditions might be improved upon. Such practicality explains the comparatively wide-ranging intellectual curiosity that defines the period in question.

So, my response to the question of 'why Scotland?' is twofold: its unique commercial advantages stimulated a new political consciousness that would lead naturally to a concentration of philosophical reflection on political and economic questions of the day. The Scottish Enlightenment is, after all, an exceptional phenomenon indebted to political stability and organized around philosophical personalities; an ideal setting for examining the moral and political tensions of early capitalist society. How well the philosophies emerging from these circumstances were reinvested into Scottish life is touched upon indirectly in chapters two and four.

Of those distinguished Scottish philosophes listed above, why select Adam Ferguson as a conversation partner for this study? To this question I wish to pose a

⁴ Francis Hutcheson, of course, immigrated to Scotland from Ireland, which may also speak to Scotland's wider philosophical attraction.

⁵ Edinburgh's intellectual prominence was arguably preceded historically by Aberdeen and Glasgow; however, Edinburgh's establishment as nation's capital and bastion of political intrigue that ultimately sanctified it as a place of substantive intellectual activity.

question of my own: why, exactly, has he remained so inconspicuous? Why is he a *surprise* selection? This thesis offers a litany of reasons why he should not have been so marginalized by modern moral and political historiography and places him, alternatively, among the earliest modernity critics. Perhaps he has been marginalized or overlooked because his criticisms did not ‘win the day.’ Nevertheless, it is the cautious subtlety of his thought, the sheer radiance of argument resistant to the popular norms of British moral and political theory, which makes him an extraordinary figure of the period. Where his peers are optimistic, he is often pessimistic; where his peers see wealth, he sees slavery; where his peers see progress, he sees decay. Indeed he tended regularly to see things his own way.

To get a better sense of his general placement within the wider tapestry of eighteenth-century Scotland, however, it would be useful here to offer a few brief biographical remarks.⁶ Adam Ferguson was reared in a Kirk minister’s family on the invisible Perthshire border between the Scottish highlands and lowlands. His position of birth, both familiarly and geographically, would prove crucial to his professional career, furnishing him a rigorous classical education and the vital advantage of family connections on his mother’s side. By the time of his matriculation to St. Andrews in the early 1740’s he spoke both Gaelic and English fluently—an ability that would later secure his placement as chaplain to the Black Watch—and was steeped in Greek and Latin classics. Upon completing his St. Andrews degree at nineteen years of age he relocated to Edinburgh to continue studies in Divinity. Here he would forge life-long friendships with churchman peers and receive his first introductions to methods of modern philosophy. His studies would be cut short, however, by a prompt appointment to the 43rd Highland Regiment (Black Watch) as deputy chaplain. A Gaelic speaking ordinand of exceptional ability with Hanoverian sympathies proved the ideal candidate for such a strategic post. His *Sermon in Ersh* delivered to the Watch on the eve of the 45’ Rebellion is a marvellous example of mid-century political theology.⁷ He intended upon his decommission from the Watch to accept ministry of a Kirk parish outside Edinburgh, but after a failed application and the death of his father in 1754 he was eventually forced to accept an offer as

⁶ All such remarks are derived from Jane Fagg’s invaluable biography of Ferguson in *Correspondence of Adam Ferguson, Vol. I*, V. Merolle (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1995), xix-cxvii.

⁷ For an introduction to and transcription of this *Sermon* see Matthew Arbo, ‘Adam Ferguson’s Sermon in the Ersh Language: A Word from 2 Samuel on Martial Responsibility and Political Order’, in *Political Theology* (Forthcoming, September 2011).

tutor to a young Scottish lord on continental tour. Upon return to Scotland, Ferguson had inadvertently entered a tumultuous shifting of social and ecclesial tides. He swiftly became engrossed in civil debates over militia policy and Kirk debates over the morality of stage-plays; in particular, the public scandal surrounding the ‘*Douglas* affair.’ Although he would eventually lose the debate over establishing militias, his support of stage-plays on moral and biblical grounds held sway by making it clear that the arts both form and express civil society simultaneously.⁸ By positioning himself on the side of his friend and *Douglas* playwright, John Home, Ferguson joined the swelling ranks of what has been described as a group Scottish moderates.⁹ Their victories here and on future issues would alter the course of many theo-political Kirk trajectories.

Ferguson’s appointment as Advocates Librarian in early 1757 at David Hume’s recommendation would be the first step in a long and distinguished academic career. Roughly two years later, and again at the recommendation of Hume, Ferguson was appointed to the Chair of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. This appointment brought to rest temporarily his many years of wandering and confirmed his academic, not ministerial, vocation. This appointment and confirmation did not halt his faithful service to the church, for he served continually as an elder and Assembly representative throughout the 1760’s and 70’s. In any event, it was not until his appointment to the more fitting Chair of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy that he published his more reputable treatises, which include *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783), and *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792). Each of the texts was well received at the time of their publication, though it would be the *Essay* that ultimately secured his place in the history of political thought. Socially Ferguson was very much the man about town, involving himself with various Edinburgh societies and supporting various political causes. He was a coveted conversation partner described amiably by all who knew him. Political involvement would eventually secure his invitation to join the Carlisle Commission as a negotiator to the recently victorious American colonies. But having failed even to make an appearance before the Continental Congress, the Commission returned to Britain just in time for

⁸ Adam Ferguson, *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh: 1757).

⁹ Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985). For the general purpose it serves, the term (‘moderate’) more or less works.

Ferguson to fall terribly, almost fatally, ill. Shortly after his recovery he resigned his Chair and retired to the countryside to try his hand (again) at farming the Scottish borders. Eight years later, at the age of seventy, he embarked on a long-awaited trip to the continent for his induction into the Berlin Academy of Sciences and subsequent tour of Italian states. Returning to Britain he farmed his plot on the borders countryside another ten years before admitting, at age 87, that he had become too feeble to maintain his estate and would retire to St. Andrews for its convenient proximity to family. Adam Ferguson died there on February 22, 1816, aged 93, and was buried in the old cathedral grounds along the northern wall. His unusually long, energetic, and eclectic life tells a great deal about the sort of character considered in this thesis—a practical man with practical concerns, whose ideas and sensibilities are derived from concrete experiences of political life. At various junctures of life Adam Ferguson was a Classicist, chaplain, tutor, traveller, librarian, elder, professor, diplomat, farmer, and socialite. Given his cautious and questioning view of new theoretical orthodoxies and eclectic life experience, the philosophic and contextual relevance of Ferguson for the central question of this thesis is suitably assured. He speaks to the central question when and where the question was of central interest.

So, having responded to a series of preliminary ‘why?’ questions concerning the legitimacy of this inquiry, the next relevant question pertains to how, methodologically, this thesis will be undertaken. Interrogating the moral and political tensions of early-modern commercial theory at the point where standard policy and procedure began to be called into question can isolate and illumine crucial ethical questions emerging from the present configurations of our economic order. In the course of this thesis it will become evident that some of these questions are perennial, while others remain unique to the eighteenth-century Scottish experience. It is my belief that the broader contours of arguments considered here can, if considered carefully, usefully inform moral deliberation over the origins, means, and ends of modern economies. Now, having said that, it is equally essential that I give some indication of *how* this historiographic program will be conducted. To prevent entanglement in overly complex methodologies I have enlisted Adam Ferguson as my conversation partner and guide. I have attempted to view the questions and circumstances of the period through his eyes, empathizing with them when possible, engaging the figures he engages, and familiarizing myself with his way of seeing. Thus my overarching arguments will be deeply indebted to Ferguson’s own discrete

insights. In other words, I have tried to understand what Ferguson would speak to contemporary states of affairs were he given the chance.

Before rehearsing the planned outline for this thesis, which will likely clarify any lingering methodological confusion, allow me to make three additional qualifications concerning recurrent tactical decisions. First, throughout this thesis I consult modern thinkers who do not necessarily ‘belong’ to the eighteenth-century world. Martin Heidegger, Robert Spaemann, and Reinhart Koselleck, for example, make occasional appearances to demonstrate why Ferguson’s problems are not entirely unique and also to help build an interpretive framework for understanding what is theoretically at stake. Connections between such thinkers and our eighteenth-century subjects will vary in strength; sometimes the connection will seem at best tacit, while at others the connection will seem direct. In every case, however, the aim is to widen momentarily the picture we are considering to include voices that may help us better understand it.

Second, there is the issue of eighteenth-century writing styles. In this age concision and elegance are united to the enhancement of both. John Locke and David Hume emerge as stylistic exemplars in this respect; their prose transmits lucidity in every turn of phrase. Well-placed irony, too, is strategically utilized, and typically with colourful or elaborate idioms. Aptitude for stretching sentences to their maximum potential also seems to have been especially prominent in the long eighteenth century. Often the relief of arriving at a sentence period feels not unlike coming up for air at the end of an underwater swim! Such length, along with the necessary support of seemingly innumerable commas for parsing clauses, makes the task of quoting these figures with brevity inordinately difficult to achieve. I have therefore adopted the technique of breaking quotations into parts so as to convey the intended argument as clearly and succinctly as possible without losing the fundamental spirit of the given passage. To have left each of these passages intact would require an excessive number of block quotes, which in turn would labour the momentum of the essay and burden the reader with vastly more detail than necessary. And seeing as Ferguson is especially appreciative of commas and clauses, this tactic will be most evident in densely expositional sections of chapters two through four.

Third, and lastly, allow me to qualify the use and non-use of certain economic terminology. Despite Adam Smith being heralded as the father of modern economics, and despite the Scottish Enlightenment’s role as incubator of early capitalism, the

word ‘capitalism’ as an economic signifier does not appear in the literature treated by this thesis. Neither does the term ‘economy’ for that matter. The transliterated *œconomy* makes rare appearances here and there, harkening to ancient notions of household management and agricultural trade, but its eighteenth-century meaning lacks most of the conceptual freight of contemporary references. ‘Commerce’ is their word of choice and I have tried to follow them in using it, though, admittedly, the terms above are also occasionally employed when most fitting to the case. This care with economic terminology has been equally applied to other conceptual genres.

The five chapters of this thesis are intended to contextualize historically Ferguson’s philosophical contributions, bring focus to his dominant concerns, and affirm his defence of Christian metaphysics. Chapter one begins by isolating key contributors to early eighteenth-century commercial theory—John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, and George Turnbull—and highlights their unique interpretations of how providence and commerce are thought to belong to one another. This question then also serves to orient the debate between select figures of the Scottish Enlightenment—Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith—who bring the discussion into closest proximity with Ferguson. The chapter concludes by reviewing several significant events of the century’s first fifty years. Chapter two is largely an exposition of Ferguson’s philosophy of history. It begins with a brief rehearsal of his Scottish peers’ understanding of history’s progress and concludes with Ferguson’s critique of conjectural models. Special attention is given in this chapter to the relevance these models have for growth variables in modern economics. Chapter three is also predominantly expository, outlining in detail Ferguson’s theory of action. As before, the aim is to distinguish him from his contemporaries and to demonstrate how his theory of action squares with certain Christian commitments. Particularly interesting on his account is the negative impact of much commercial practice upon human initiative and genuine exertion. In chapter three I focus almost exclusively on Ferguson’s moral and political critique of popular economic policy advanced in his *Essay*. His preoccupation with establishing militias remains central to his wider political intentions, on my view, for as the defining issue of his early political pamphlets it extends to the mutual corroboration of commerce and militarism outlined in the *Essay* itself. Upon rehearsing these arguments I then apply Ferguson’s pessimistic conclusion to contemporary economic realities. Lastly, in chapter five, I identify three of Ferguson’s metaphysical opponents—determinacy, universality, and romanticism—and affirm his suspicion that when incorporated

philosophically each distorts an authentically Christian vision of reality and the moral order upheld by it.

Each chapter of this thesis builds upon the next to support something like the following argument: The goals of modern commerce and the methods used to achieve them generate irresolvable moral and political antinomies—to the extent that modern economies remain inherently progressive—by inhibiting or altogether eliminating authentic human action and by undermining the very political institutions intended to sustain commercial life. The several premises supporting this conclusion are articulated in each chapter. If the poignancy of Ferguson’s judgment occasionally takes the reader by surprise, you are not alone; this recognition serves as testimony to how little has changed since the late eighteenth-century, and its challenge of moral contradictions in the modern marketplace speaks as truthfully to our perils as it did three hundred years ago to the Scot. This poignancy will repeatedly validate my contention that study of a less prominent moral philosopher of the eighteenth-century can offer us new insight into perennial social and political questions. If Ferguson can help us ask better ethical questions about modern commercial exchange, then this thesis will have served part of its purpose. If it persuades the reader that Economy can itself become a tyrant, negating the freedom and abundance it promises always to furnish, then it will have served the other part. The self-defeating nature of modern economy is premised on the antithesis between means and ends—false ends inevitably undermine even the most precise means. And thus an increasing number of ‘theys’ are swept up into the abstract confusion of economic misdirection and left scratching their heads over which exchanges are truly worth transacting and how they ultimately contribute to the common good. Such confusion is perhaps the final product of having misplaced treasure: *for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Matt.6:21).

Chapter 1

God and Commerce, 1700-1764

When sitting down to a well-prepared fillet of fish, the attentive diner will note an intrinsic complexity to what is savoured. Temperature is detected almost immediately, then texture and consistency, and then perhaps different flavours afforded by both the fish itself, its oils and acidity, as well as by the selected method for cooking. If especially thoughtful, a fine white wine matched precisely for the occasion might unlock still more palatal experiences. In a similar way this chapter invites the reader to savour a fifty-year sliver of the eighteenth-century; to pay close attention to its complex flavour, texture, and consistency as a period of historical interest. History deceives us if we think of it as a static artefact laying patiently for our archaeological discovery. We often find at the uncovering of an historical artefact a far more complex, fragile, and unpredictable relic than anticipated. History constantly surprises us; we think we have grasped its meaning firmly, then it slips uncontrollably between our fingers. This is not to say that history is essentially unfactual, of course; it is simply not the type of history we are concerned with here. Statistical or objective “facts” of history provide a skeletal frame for interpreting intellectual history but cannot wholly prevent our expectations from becoming shipwrecked on the dunes of historical uncertainty. The dating of parliamentary union in Britain, for example, is a fundamentally different question than that of why the idea of union arose in the first place or what enabled its success. This chapter is concerned with the latter type of historical inquiry. Yet, the accuracy or success of this intellectual history will depend to a large extent on the object under inquiry, as is par for the course. What sorts of questions need asking? How should the questions be put? What are the historical inquiry’s limits? How might the various contours, dimensions, layers, and spirits that constitute the shape of history be identified and their consistency articulated?

The aim of this essay is to discern how God and commerce are thought to belong to one another in early-eighteenth century moral and political philosophy. The eighteenth-century is, after all, a peculiarly philosophical period and its philosophical

method very much the fashion of the day. Even much theology of the period sticks to the rules of the philosophical game, avoiding critical accusations of preachiness. Questions of what God is like or how God acts, for example, are commonly responded to in moral and political terms. And for that matter the same goes for questions of commercial order and historical meaning. Ordinarily history is summoned to reinforce arguments that already appear empirically conclusive. Commerce, too, is a notably political subject addressed almost without exception as a moral and political idea. To crystallize the central question of how concepts of God and commerce relate to one another in the eighteenth-century, therefore, this chapter provides a ranging exposé of early eighteenth-century philosophical engagement with the question of how providence governs a shifting, and in some cases fiscally burgeoning, commercial sphere. The purpose of this exposé, in the end, is to offer a contextual backdrop against which Adam Ferguson's contribution to this question might be set. Beginning this account at the year 1700 and concluding it at 1764 is, as with any divide in the history of ideas, an artificial narrowing of scope. Many key seventeenth-century influences on eighteenth-century philosophy, such as Grotius, Hobbes, and Pufendorf will be mentioned only in passing. Attention must be closely directed to the immediate context of Ferguson's intellectual career and thus with the exception of these few continental theorists focus principally on the British constellation of moral and political thought. Rehearsing the arguments of philosophers offers illuminating snapshots of the period, each taken at different moments but regularly capturing similar settings. When considered collectively the snapshots depict crucial continuities and discontinuities, agreements and disagreements, receptions and rejections comprising plot points within the early-century theo-political narrative. If historical, moral, and political implications of early eighteenth-century political economy can be mapped and its general trajectories underscored, then the stage will be set for Ferguson's entrance into the late-century moral and political discourse.

I

The first instalment to the longer philosophic story that needs to be told here begins with John Locke. Beginning the story with his starting point takes us back quite a long time, to the mysterious time before the flickering energy of civilization, the "state of nature." He tells us that the state of nature has two perfections, "a state

of perfect freedom to order actions” and “a state also of equality.”¹⁰ This state of perfect freedom and equality is governed against excess by the law of reason, which “teaches all mankind [that] no one ought to harm another in life, health, liberty, or possession.”¹¹ Reason, as a law, disallows actions violating the principles of liberty and equality. The dictum is not radically different from the contemporary quip that one may do as one pleases so long as it does not harm anyone else. But Locke takes the law of reason seriously, so seriously in fact that the law of reason becomes a command of God. Now, the command of God is necessary in a state of nature primarily because nature is not intrinsically good and so cannot serve as an ultimate moral or political authority. God is for Locke the ultimate authority of moral and political order, but for a strange reason. God is authoritative over creatures because he *possesses* his creatures as property and directly wills that no harm come to persons in what they possess. Possession therefore confers authority. As a individual possessors each is obliged to preserve what is most immediately possessed—one’s own life—and only as a second-order duty to preserve that which is possessed by another. Thus, the state of nature is founded on the concept of possession initiated and defined by the Creator’s prior possession of his creation; because God possesses, humans possess. In a political sphere of perfect freedom and equality the only means for protecting individual possessions is for all to compact on preventing injury one to another. Everyone must agree not to violate reason’s law of freedom and equality, which would be an injury to the person so violated. Thus, for Locke, built into this supposed state of nature is a power of self-possession that pre-conditions political society as such.

Particularly striking in this account of pre-political man is Locke’s immediate use of economic language. The concept of property alone legitimates authority. As has been hinted already, Locke derives his concept of private property from the theological idea of Creator possessing creature, which in turn authorizes the creature to possess as the Creator possesses—to imitate his ownership. As Istvan Hont has noted, Locke departs from Grotius’ and Pufendorf’s definition of “exclusive and absolute right of dominion,” and instead adopts the definition of “absolute ‘right in’

¹⁰ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), II,4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II,6

something.”¹² The shift in Locke’s definition is toward the subjective, taking possession of a “right in” something. Justification for possessing an object is derived from this right of self-possession.¹³ The sequence goes something like this: God possesses man, man possesses self, so therefore man may possess objects in creation. This raises the natural question of how to arbitrate the claim to property between two individuals in compact; what are we to do with “common” land, to that which is available to everyone as a possible object of ownership?¹⁴ Land is “common” in the sense that it is physically common to a community, since God has “given the earth to the children of men; given it to mankind in *common*.”¹⁵ This gift is given to man by God and should be made personal property in the same way God possesses man.

Property is acquired only through human labour. Locke rejects Pufendorf’s argument for a state of nature relegated to scarcity and instead envisages a state of abundance in which the great excess of natural resources benefits wider society. The stark difference between Pufendorf’s “scarcity” and Locke’s “abundance” is a product of their disparate views of the Self and its possession of the world. For Pufendorf, the created world holds both possibilities and limitations; for moral and political reasons, some material objects may or may not be privately owned. For Locke, on the other hand, only other wills erect hedging limitations; unpossessed material objects without wills are therefore susceptible to possession. His theory of property is thus wholly anthropocentric. Those objects are mine that come into contact with my person and are integrated into my person by my will. Whatever is absorbed into the Self by labour is considered an object of property. Locke explains:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.¹⁶

¹² Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p.431.

¹³ Ibid. One will also notice here the radical departure from the views of the reformers, for whom self-possession was an strangely unchristian notion.

¹⁴ In the few pages that follow I will refer to the ‘common’ in the same manner as Locke, often without a definite article (“a” or “the,” for example) in order to maintain conceptual clarity. The “common” is the natural resources given by God in creation for the use and benefit of mankind. It is “common” to each member of society in the sense that it was given by God *to* and *for* every member.

¹⁵ *Second Treatise of Government*, V.25 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Ibid., V.27.

On this account the “givenness” of all things to the Self is part of God’s express will for humankind, having “given us all things richly” (1Tim.6:12).¹⁷ Moreover, the history of property itself affirms distribution of common for personal possession. Drawing cleverly upon the biblical narratives of Cain and Abel and Abraham and Lot, Locke illustrates how labour increases personal property and proves that the vast quantity of common should be parcelled and privately possessed to avoid rampant waste. God gave the world to the children of men *in common*, but now “we see how labour could make men distinct titles to several parcels of it, for their private uses.”¹⁸ On Locke’s view the world was given to everyone but through my labour I can make an ever-greater part of it mine alone. The history of property—indeed, the biblical history of property—becomes the story of continual accumulation of property taken from the common through labour. Nevertheless, though God has given to man the common for his use and advantage, ownership is not without attending obligations. Immediately following his quotation of 1 Timothy, Locke claims that the common is for man to enjoy but never to the extent of spoiling detrimentally what is possessed, for “nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy.”¹⁹ The world is open to all men equally but it is precisely because it is available to anyone that certain boundaries and limitations are necessary to ensure inequalities are not perpetuated. Placing limits on liberal acquisitions has the natural result of elevating principles of equality above that of liberty. Inequalities deepened by unbounded liberty are warning signs that natural order has been violated.

Locke’s distaste for inequality pales in comparison to his disapproval of covetousness, however, which thoroughly denounced in his wider critique of acquisitiveness and waste. Good student of the Bible that he is, Locke recognizes the iniquity of covetousness. He believes it to be “innate to human nature and not simply a contingent historical curse of a commercial society.”²⁰ The fact that covetousness remains deeply embedded in human nature is best illustrated, thinks Locke, by the evolution of commerce. Covetousness has the capacity to unmake persons who cannot resist her persistent temptations; she is toxic and ruinous if for too long indulged. And yet covetousness applied routinely for to the betterment of

¹⁷ Ibid., V.31.

¹⁸ Ibid., V.39.

¹⁹ Ibid. (emphasis mine)

²⁰ *Jealousy of Trade*, p.438

mankind is commendable, for “he who appropriates land to himself by his labour does not lessen but increases the common stock of mankind.”²¹ The danger of covetousness is that it can never be satisfied, yearning always for objects yet unpossessed. Biblical condemnation of covetousness does not seem to persuade Locke in the slightest; the abounding benefits it brings to the “common stock of mankind” are demonstrably clear. Dangers arise only when equality is threatened. Why Locke felt that property and not equality should become a rightful object of covetousness remains unclear.

Property and labour share reciprocal utility—increased labour means increased land and increased land means increased labour. The more labour invested and reinvested in land, the more the land yields; surpluses are redevoted to the purchase and development of more land and the process is initiated all over again. Coming at the problem of private property from a Christian point of view, which Locke doubtless believes himself to be doing, the best solution to economic injustices would be to avoid “situations of grave necessity altogether.”²² Moral complications involved in property ownership and labour are made manifest by poverty. The only way to avoid situations of “grave necessity,” however, is to put men to work and let their hands become instruments of civil improvement. Labour relieves poverty by generating something valuable, something tradable. Having become a commodity it can then lead over time to the possession of productive property. Theologically, this idea more or less corresponds to God’s providential care, who having given the world to humankind for its subsistence and comfort also demands “sweat of the brow” for creation’s maintenance (Gen.3:19). An authentic conception of Providence is subsequently overshadowed, however, not merely by Locke’s reliance on useful covetousness, but by reversing the political priority of labour and property. For philosophers of the past, especially the scholastics, “property is a moment arising within the act of communication, in which something that is ours becomes mine in order to become ours again.”²³ For Locke, on the other hand, the common is that which should be privately possessed so yet *more* can be possessed individually and

²¹ *Second Treatise of Government*, V.37. In this vein, Hont suggests that “Locke and Pufendorf took it for granted that economic allocation was best served if someone’s need was another’s gain.” (*JT*, 95).

²² *Jealousy of Trade*, 95.

²³ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 279.

less possessed collectively. Hence the total loss of common land and Locke's to see that "both work and property acquire meaning only as part of a wider social communication."²⁴

Before concluding this treatment of Locke's doctrine of Providence, it would be useful first to review his critical response to the early eighteenth-century threats of "scepticism" and "enthusiasm." Scepticism is rebutted by the supreme rational coherence evident in the naturally ordered world. Natural law being teleological in orientation means that—for whatever else humanity may accomplish—nothing can detract from the genius of the Creator and Lawgiver, who has built into the world a way for man to make something for himself, just as God has. The sheer ordered brilliance of the natural world disproves the sceptic's claim of not "knowing" the purposes of God in nature. The second threat, the threat of "enthusiasm," is addressed by appeal to intellectual principles (epistemology) and thus to what can be rightly claimed on theological grounds.²⁵ "Enthusiasm" is an eighteenth-century label applied to religious emphasis on personal experience of God through channels of pietistic devotion. Enthusiasts seek the direct affection and immediacy of God. The trouble with enthusiasm on Locke's view is that religious experience is categorically *not* the type of experience that translates into knowledge, as the only fact about God that can be truly known is the proposition that God exists.²⁶ Moreover, not only is religious experience a matter of opinion (*doxa*), and not of knowledge, but "no man inspired by God can by any revelation communicate to others any new simple ideas which they had not before from sensation or reflection."²⁷ If God did in fact directly reveal simple ideas to a specific individual in history, the content of that experience could not possibly be communicated adequately for everyone's edification. If a revelation does not meet the standards of reason, thinks Locke, then of all the things this special communication might be, it surely cannot be revelation.²⁸ Thus the logic of providence follows strictly from the content of human perception. We perceive the way things are in the world and when

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ John Locke, *Letters on Toleration* (London: Alexander Murray, 1870).

²⁶ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, x, 2. For more on Locke's moral and religious epistemology see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125.

²⁷ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.xviii.2.

²⁸ Ibid. IV.xviii.8.

described those descriptions *define* how providence oversees the world. Natural law becomes in Locke's theory an explanatory device containing within it all that is necessary for understanding how societies are to thrive in the natural world. His version of providence has both an unexpected element both of faith and of hope. We take the present state of affairs to be the result of providence, assuming all the while that the natural law disclosing this truth is sanctioned by providence. Those queer states of affairs that seem somehow problematic, wrong, or wicked, one can only hope will soon be corrected or redeemed. Providence either already has established, or will establish a perfect order.

In any event, returning again to Locke's commercial theory, we notice that the next step in his argument identifies natural justice with socio-economic equality. As was seen above, labour begets property when integrated into the body, and property begets labour by employing more hands in the pursuit of abundance. Both labour and property are social foods for which all members of society perpetually hunger. God's command "from the sweat of they brow" shall sustenance come and "you shall have dominion" over all the earth become unqualified justification for labouring and possessing on ever larger scales. The "common" which was given by God to man is to be made mine so that more can be made mine and more hands can be put to work—the growth-cycle is limitless. More begets more, extra begets extra in a providential order of ceaseless acquisition. How this property-labour interplay leads to the ideal equality desired for mankind is never quite substantiated, though one is left with the optimistic view that, given the vast quantity of common available for private possession, all the extra labour will eventually spill-over into greater benefits to all. Classically Christian moral concepts such as "goodness" and "love" are on this view replaced by the ideals of perfect freedom, dominion, and equality. On the political plane the hand of providence sanctifies the labours of society and gives it license (even blessing) to increase property and exploit God's given abundance; providence has become less provisional and more permissive. This switch is clearly evinced in Locke's consecration of covetousness, and this despite the Christian tradition's warnings and denunciations. Covetousness and envy perform useful tasks in commercial society, on Locke's view, by spurring citizens toward further accumulation; indeed commercial growth itself is premised on their affective power. Providence authorizes and encourages the inherently progressive and equalizing forces of commerce. The history of commerce proves that the object of providence is progress itself. That his doctrine of providence has been cast entirely in economic

terms, that God's will and governance are expressed by certain commercial functions, does not seem to have dissuaded Locke in the slightest; providence simply rubber-stamps the natural laws of commerce.

Bernard Mandeville made similar moves to redefine the basic moral and political configuration of commercial life. As is typical of eighteenth-century moral discourses, Mandeville wishes to describe what man *is* as a human being, not as he ideally should be.²⁹ What commonly frustrates readers of the *Fable* is its elusive and somewhat playful literary style; *The Fable of the Bees* is exactly that, a fable of moral intrigue. And yet he makes the fable work for him in a way that has purchase in concrete human affairs. If his fable can persuade readers to think more deeply about their place within the structures of civil society, then the fable will have served its purpose. His starting point, like Locke, begins with a state of nature characterized by self-love. With this line of argument Mandeville pits himself directly against the view held by Lord Shaftesbury that understands the state of nature as intrinsically altruistic and benevolent.³⁰ Shaftesbury had invented a faculty affectionately referred to as the Moral Sense; a faculty functioning much like other sensory faculties—sight, smell, touch—but with exceptional moral sensitivity. The moral sense serves to ground the multiplicity of affections that constitute moral life. What we are asking when we inquire about the morals of an action is whether the emotional cause or character of the action is praiseworthy or blameworthy. Passions are the energetic source of action and as such become the object of moral interrogation. Shaftesbury, against the standard Protestant account of post-lapsarian corruption, stressed the naturally benevolent posture of mankind, seeing as this posture overtly beneficial to wider society. Or perhaps such an altruistic posture depends ultimately on the independent response of self-reflective subjects, each with a view to their own self-love and altruism. In either case, Mandeville is concerned to show that man's natural inclination to self-love is ultimately much more beneficial to commercial society than benevolent altruism.

²⁹ On this point see the "Introduction" to the *Fable* in Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988). A similar method is employed later by Hume.

³⁰ Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For an interpretation of Mandeville's thought as largely reactive to Shaftesbury, see Alasdair MacIntyre's *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1966), 162.

Every person is held in constant tension between self-love and neighbourly love, but why is it that self-love seems always to dominate the polarity? For Mandeville, the only reason one person is self-interested is because everyone is self-interested. If the proportion were inversed and most members of society naturally altruistic, things might well be different. But that is to entertain a fruitless counter-factual; humans are simply and essentially self-interested. God is not blamed for his design of inherently self-interested human beings because man is in this state of nature “ignorant of the true Deity.” To have knowledge of God, on the other hand, would mean that the state of nature had been left and thus can make a real difference in one’s moral life and in the life of political society. To know God means you are not alone. The only sensible way to understand the Self therefore is within a context of social relations. Mandeville’s account of sociality is further supported by his reflections on virtue and vice. Virtue “arises when, contrary to nature, man endeavours to benefit others, or from the conquest of his own passions out of a rational ambition of being good.”³¹ Any action that overcomes self-interested passions and benefits society is considered virtuous; whereas vice signifies every action that disregards the public or in some way injures social cohesion. Because all are naturally inclined toward vice—toward socially injurious self-interestedness—the only way for each to act virtuously is to restrain harmful passions. This raises the question of whether our notions of virtue and vice are derived from politics or from religion. Mandeville dismisses both, arguing instead that virtue and vice are institutions constructed by and for civil society and thus, paradoxically, society both forms and is formed by the unpredictable and often erratic effects of vice and virtue.

Yet virtue always implies a degree of pride. A precondition to the pursuit of virtue is a desire to be virtuous. Far from being relegated to the category of damning vices, pride is the most amiable of all vices and regularly bears greatest resemblance to virtue. Pride is not a real virtue, as in metaphysically real, but merely resembles it in public appearance. The fact that pride is a vice mankind holds in common, and because God is provident over all human affairs, pride must be capable of serving the good of civil society in some publically recognizable way. Hidden pleasures latent in pride are released and actualized by the positive recognitions of society; pride’s publicity being the key that unlocks vice’s pleasure. Everyone understands that the

³¹ “An Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue,” in *Fable of the Bees*, 49

reward of a virtuous action—public recognition itself—actually consists in the contemplation of one’s own worth. The reward of virtue is therefore discovered in the joy of imagining the praise of others; the unparalleled rapture of realizing public appreciation. Pleasure is to pride, explains Mandeville, as paleness is to cold or trembling is to fear.

When applying this notion of pride to the commercial order a noticeable tension arises between the motivations for economic exchange and the conditions for doing so truthfully. The allure of commercial gain tends to subject moral goodness to the irresistible demands of pride, steering market-goers toward still deeper levels of hypocrisy and self-deception. The marketplace blurs moral distinctions between advantage and disadvantage, pride and humility, selfishness and benevolence, making commercial gain a temptation that distorts public understanding of how to exchange wares for the common good. Identifying this problem of moral vagueness in commerce is, in fact, the whole purpose of the *Fable*. “The design of the fable,” explains Mandeville in his Preface, “is to show the *impossibility* of enjoying all the most elegant comforts of life that are to be met with in an industrious, wealthy and powerful nation, and at the same time be blessed with all the virtue and innocence that can be wished for in a Golden age.”³² The tension is expressed as follows: enjoyment of luxury and the pleasure of virtue are morally incompatible. Pride, the vice traditionally associated with the real undoing of any morally ordered commercial sphere, is for Mandeville simply the beginning of new possibilities and the very fuel of commerce. The real undoing of commerce is not pride, but *indulgence*, where unrestrained passions are gratified at the expense of society. But because pride supports the pursuit of virtue it must also have a cohering power within civil society. Pride is essential to great societies because it is evident that without pride wealth could not be sustained or increased—their pride is causally what makes them great. This is not to say that pride is not morally blameworthy in some way, but that it plays an important motivational role in national economy. Mandeville illustrates this tension between virtue and commerce ironically with a caricature of London’s “dirty streets.” The opulent complain that the streets of London are far too dirty and must be thoroughly cleaned when the fact of the matter is that London’s streets are dirty precisely because the opulent in their commercial

³² Ibid., 6.

schemes filthy them, and scarcely for any other reason. Mandeville goes so far as to suggest that it is not the poor that stand in the way of the rich but the rich that stand in the way themselves.

It is often argued, as it is argued by the editor of the *Fable* volumes, B. B. Kaye, that Mandeville's thought serves as a precursor to laissez-fair economics and to the immanent triumph of capitalism. This claim is inaccurate for several reasons. First, as some commentators have argued, Mandeville remained mercantilist in the sense of being "intensely concerned with the importance of regulating a country's trade balance with the rest of the world for the purpose of assuring an excess, in value terms, of exports of imports."³³ But if Mandeville's theory represents a mercantilist position, what exactly is the role of government, seeing as his theory is neither interventionist nor laissez-faire? A potential answer lay in his concept of social evolution: "human institutions are not to be regarded as the product of human ingenuity...[but] the fruits of a long and gradual growth process."³⁴ What has helped precipitate this progress most effectively? Stable political institutions overseen by a "dextrous" manager who establishes "an environment of such a nature that the individual's attempt to gratify his passions will result in actions which are meritorious."³⁵ If the manager's government must intervene and rectify political wrongdoings the aim should be to create a society which would run itself; that is, intervention should not repress human passion but provide proper channels down which passion may usefully travel.³⁶ "For a society where each individual's pursuit of his self-interest is made to harmonize with the interests of other individuals—such a society is, itself, the product not only of historical evolution: it is also, in a very meaningful sense, the *creation* of wise governments."³⁷ Wise laws and political intelligence remain essential to the continued order of commercial society. All societies wish to avoid arbitrary governmental interference in economic affairs, while at the same time desiring government to involve itself when injustices arise.

³³ Nathan Rosenberg, "Mandeville and Laissez-Faire," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Apr.—Jun., 1963), 183-196.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 186. An interesting study at this juncture would be to explore the agreement between Mandeville and Pufendorf's respective theories of social evolution, but an impossible venture under the present scope.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 191

Mandeville seems to have believed that “the most vital aspect of any society—its success or failure generally—depends upon the skill with which it is able to direct men’s passions toward the achievement of goals defined by a larger collectivity.”³⁸

This argument would explain the first sentence of Mandeville’s Preface to the *Fable*, where he claims “laws and government are to the political bodies of civil societies, what the vital spirits and life itself are to the natural bodies of animated creatures.”³⁹ Law and political authority are the life-blood that makes community possible. With them society is able to address the tension between commerce and virtue. Although the tension cannot be altogether eliminated from the human scene, pride can, by the power of institutions, be prudently and intelligently directed to the common good. It is in this light, the strongly institutional, that Mandeville’s faint Christian commitments are lifted from the shadows: institutions are for him a gift of Providence. Humans were designed for societies governed by providence as expressed in wise law and intelligent political authority. The many evil vices that commonly affront society, regrettable as they may be, are providentially ordered to the best possible result. In an important sense Mandeville would seem to affirm the biblical idea “what man meant for evil, God meant for good” (Gen.50:20), while altogether ignoring the words of Christ, “you cannot be a slave both of God and money” (Matt.6:24).

George Turnbull offered one of the more ingenious responses to Mandeville’s moral-commercial tension. For Turnbull, we derive our understanding of the commercial order and of how it ought to be ordered from our understanding of the natural law disclosed to humanity as the will of God.⁴⁰ Rather than pit self-love against benevolence—as was the tendency of Shaftesbury, for example—Turnbull substitutes the principle of benevolence with a principle of *action*. This principled distinction is not so much an either-or as it is a both-and. Human beings possess a relentless desire for happiness that steers exertive action toward its intended object. Affections cannot remain objectively detached and must always have an object in which to rest, but because the relation between affection and object is not and cannot be immediate, reason must bridge the gap to secure the truthfulness of affection’s

³⁸ Ibid., 193

³⁹ “Preface,” *The Fable of the Bees*, 7.

⁴⁰ George Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*, ed. A. Broadie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005).

expression as well as the object's worthiness. This explains why, on Turnbull's account, reason directs human actions and why he emphasized so strenuously the importance of education, the end of education being the production of "love and patience of thinking."⁴¹ Apart from active exertion in pursuit of an object the attainment of authentic goods is impossible. Deductively speaking this means that goods are not intrinsic to human being but are instead that for which every human strives. Inactivity, thinks Turnbull, leads inevitably to self-ruination and to the wasting of potential. Only the active person can be genuinely happy and self-approving: "this therefore is one characteristic of our proper happiness, that it consists in a course of industry to attain ends which reason approves, under the direction and guidance of reason, as to the use of means."⁴² The course of human action should take the path of Industry, which represents a diligent and socially focused characterization of categorically commercial actions. The social orientation of industry implies that action is wedded to a principle of sociality that offers natural limits and meaning to what is performed. Isolated activity without a mediating society is meaningless. Civic participation is essential to human industry because "the chief article of our pleasures...consists in mutually giving and receiving."⁴³ As creatures of interdependency it is also crucial that natural differences between members of society remain intact. Everyone is necessary in a particular way. Each person is for everyone and each must accept this purpose as intrinsic to society's teleological ordering. Self-love should have no purchase; its hypocrisy and implicit jealousy disallowed from severing community. Natural law reinforces this fact, thinks Turnbull, since it is for one's generosity that one is praised and appreciated by peers; the field-hand is thanked for his harvest, the teacher is praised for his instruction, and the pastor is honoured for his service—each authentic contribution to the common good lauded by all. The decency of interpersonal differences, from vocation to property ownership, should have no real bearing upon our sentiments: I am for this industry, you are for that. Turnbull seems to have believed that the cohesive effects of this difference in property and status, combined with the duty of each citizen to labour for the good of the community, uncovers principles of action—

⁴¹ George Turnbull, *Observations upon Liberal Education*, Terrence O. Moore, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 574.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 575.

in this case, love of fame and love of power—that are natural to the endeavours of mankind, “for what else is at bottom but desire to expand and enlarge ourselves, to dilate and widen our sphere of activity?”⁴⁴ Love of fame and power energize action and make it capable of achieving something beyond its initial scope, and yet both loves do so only within the given natural order, the principles of which “we cannot alter...but must conform [to]...in order to attain our greatest happiness.”⁴⁵

When Turnbull suggests that riches gradually corrupts the honest mind and that affections directed toward opulence are “absolutely condemnable,” while at the same time maintaining that such affections are not “absolutely pernicious,” he can say so consistently because of his faith in the powers of reason and benevolence to keep the corruptions of luxury in check.⁴⁶ Natural law orders commercial society in such a way that the distribution of property and wealth becomes predicated on the merit of the individual. The direct link between morals and property was applied equally to forms of government where Turnbull, following Harrington, suggested that a nation’s form of government corresponded to the proportion of property owned.⁴⁷ If one person owned most of the property, then the political form would be monarchical; if most property were owned only by a privileged few, then the form would be aristocratic; and if property was owned by a wide range of citizens, then the nations would be democratic. On the human scale, at any rate, morality might be advantageous to personal economic flourishing but that does not mean actions motivated by love of fame or power are necessarily virtuous. By bracketing providence, justice, and sin within the descriptive and prescriptive power of natural law, and by making mankind responsible for adjudicating the mandates of natural law, Turnbull has created a tension wherein one is often left to judge between what is naturally good for oneself and what appears naturally good for society. It may well be true that fame and power enliven active industry, but it remains highly doubtful that such principles of motivation do not at the same time become its *ends*. In other words, it does not seem likely that the pursuit of fame and power in industry can be defeated or overcome merely by rational precision or sympathetic benevolence. How

⁴⁴ Ibid., 595.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 599.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁷ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

exactly is one to accept one's place in stratified society and yet shun envying another's position? Indeed, how is this possible when, as Turnbull admits, everyone is enlivened by dominion, enlargement, and the insatiable thirst for more?

II

As we approach Ferguson's immediate context it is crucial that we now narrow our focus to the Scottish tradition of moral and political thought represented by Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith. In the case of the former, Francis Hutcheson, we will want to avoid a redundant rehearsal of his attempt to synthesize Locke's political and Shaftesbury's moral philosophy, though this will be to some degree unavoidable, and instead make the distinctiveness of his moral and political contribution clear in theological terms. Theologically speaking, what role does God play in Hutcheson's moral and political thought? In response to this question of Hutcheson's theological attentiveness, the aim will be to isolate foundational principles supporting the architecture of his moral and political synthesis, particularly those relevant to commercial exchange, and interpret them in light of his theological commitments.

Hutcheson's moral epistemology—emphasis on “epistemology,” since morals on his account cannot be conceived without reference to the mind—is a hybrid model of Lockean empiricism and Moral Sense psychology.⁴⁸ Given Locke's explanation of how one comes to possess knowledge and what one knows when one comes to possess it, acquiring uniquely moral knowledge requires that one experience the binding authority of the natural law. The philosophical description of the experience of natural law is only understood by the Moral Sense, which functions like a gateway through which all moral knowledge passes. Its task is not to be confused with that of reason. For our purposes, the important point is that the moral sense provides the initial cause, or explanation, of both actions and judgments; responsible for initiating action in the social sphere, as well as passing judgements of approbation or disapprobation. Following Shaftesbury, on the other hand, Hutcheson readily maintains that each possesses natural sentiments of benevolence and altruism toward

⁴⁸ The following points on the finer details of Hutcheson's moral philosophy are taken from *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Wolfgang Leidhold, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), and *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002).

others. To the question of “what does our moral sense lead us to approve?” he replies we tend to approve of happiness arising from virtue and of the “moral perfection of the mind possessing them.”⁴⁹ The moral sense serves as a benevolent origin of practical judgement that approves and therefore also rewards performance of benevolent actions.⁵⁰ All moral concepts—good, true, duty, virtue, law, reward, etc.—derive ultimate meaning from their relation to the moral sense and are morally applicable only insofar as they proceed from that moral sense. Perception and judgment thus constitute the basic functions of the moral sense; observing the virtue or vice of an action and judging whether it is approved or disapproved of.⁵¹ For Hutcheson, an action’s approbation or disapprobation depends on its contribution to the happiness of society. If an act encourages public happiness, then that act merits approval and reward. The same goes for its opposite, disapproval. Yet, because reason occupies itself purely with the adjudication of truthful propositions, and thus can only tell us how or whether an action conforms to law, this deliberative enterprise remains wholly unreasonable in Hutcheson’s theory.⁵² The moral sense alone justifies reasons for acting; whereas the faculty of reason can only detect the shape of objective relations by drawing comparisons.⁵³ Thus, in assigning standards of judgement to the moral sense and charging it with the task of evaluating the character of actions, Hutcheson has vested this (internal) faculty with total authority and can therefore conclude that “morality is a matter of qualities in persons.”⁵⁴ When he also locates the natural law in the moral sense, one can easily understand why, given his primary agenda to point has been organization of morality around the apex of a newly contrived moral apparatus.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Francis Hutcheson, *Collected Works, Volume V* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1990), I.62.

⁵⁰ Stephen Buckle, *Natural Law and the Theory of Property: Grotius to Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 210.

⁵¹ See especially section one of treatise II in Hutcheson’s *Inquiry*.

⁵² On this point see the second part of Locke’s *Essay*.

⁵³ William Frankena, “Hutcheson’s Moral Sense Theory,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (June 1955), 356-375.

⁵⁴ Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, p.71. A similar point is made by Buckle when he suggests that, for Hutcheson, “human sociability is the foundation of the natural law, the moral sense also [being] the ultimate foundation of natural law.” (NLTP, p.212)

⁵⁵ In calling the moral sense an “invention” I am following the example of Istvan Hont. See *Jealousy of Trade*, chapter 3.

Morals are not observable “out there” in reality, but within the mind. Since the authority of natural law has already been made subject to the mind, the end of the natural law will always remain the acting subject and his relation to civil society. This leads us to consider briefly Hutcheson’s view of subjective rights, and in particular, how these rights relate to political authority as such. In his *Inquiry* Hutcheson asserts that it is from the moral sense that we derive our idea of rights.⁵⁶ As a thoroughgoing contractarian he considers individual possession of subjective rights to be the common social object anchoring public happiness. Rights are political claims we all possess in common. Social contracts are forged in civil society as a means of protecting and preserving those rights. The reason our contracts have binding authority over our commercial exchanges, for example, is because the contracting action has been approved as benevolent by moral sense and directed toward the wider happiness of society. On this view the moral sense sanctions social contract. Our contracts, regardless of their precise form, enshrine personal rights. The difficulties in accounting for individual verses public happiness are patently evident but wholly unquestioned by Hutcheson. In any event, the crucial point for our purposes is that rights are the naturally binding authority of contracts, ensuring every “person has a natural right to perform every action [to] best maximize the common good.”⁵⁷

Returning to our central concern, Hutcheson’s theological consistency, there seems an irreconcilable difference between what he himself thought about the Deity’s role in his system, and what role the Deity can actually play. On an affirmative note, he argues that the moral sense is an institution of Providence implanted naturally in humankind to act always for the greatest good of society.⁵⁸ The natural law implanted in the moral sense integrates human faculties and makes each capable of becoming worthy of approbation. Yet, in expounding this naturalistic account of morals he has, at the same time, constructed a theoretical device that renders the Deity inessential. This uncomfortable position is illustrated nicely by the basic arrangement of *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions*, where he feels

⁵⁶ *Inquiry*, treatise II, section 7.

⁵⁷ Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 80.

⁵⁸ For Hutcheson, man’s ‘natural’ state is pre-lapsarian. *On the Social Nature of Man*, in *Two Texts on Human Nature*, Thomas Mautner, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Hont’s “Introduction” to *JT*, p.39.

obliged to explain at book's closure "how far a regard to the Deity is necessary to make an action virtuous."⁵⁹ In the last sentence of that treatment, moreover, the reader is told "particular actions may be virtuous [even] where there is no actual intention of pleasing the Deity."⁶⁰ Virtue may therefore share no relation to divine commands. Nevertheless, it is also true for Hutcheson that the law hangs upon the words of Christ, whose command it is to love God and love one's neighbour as one's self (Lk.10:27). Neighbourly love absorbs self-love. The instruction of Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospels is moreover affirmed by the created order but does so in a way that renders Christ's instruction purely descriptive. So, is God essential or inessential to morals? Is he the Author of morality, or the immanent Lawgiver? A possible solution to this tension might be that God is simply presumed, or latent, in Hutcheson's theory, meaning God provides the cohesive power that confers all authority, even to the moral sense itself.⁶¹ Perhaps Hutcheson's "theological perspective on morality is, so to say, the *completion* of morality."⁶² Politically, too, God's appears immanent. Recall the above tension concerning individual rights claims versus contribution to the common good. One can easily envisage numerous actions that may first appear to express benevolent intentions but that do not actually contribute to the good of wider society. A stockjobber purchases shares in the East India Company because he believes it will service broader society, when in fact the purchase has thickened only his own pocketbook, devastated the entrepreneurial spirit of competing companies, and increased unemployment.⁶³ Hutcheson's way of resolving this tension between individual and communal goods comes by appeal to natural theology, claiming that "in principle there is no conflict between common good and individual good" because *Providence* has seen to it that these conflict as little as possible.⁶⁴ But how, under a (Lockean) contractarian civil constitution, can this be an enduring or reasonable solution?

⁵⁹ Treatise II, section 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Jonathan Edwards appears to have found something overtly Christian in Hutcheson's moral thought, see A. Owen Aldridge, "Edwards and Hutcheson," in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan. 1951), 35-53.

⁶² Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 71

⁶³ The disastrous consequences of the South Sea Scheme vividly illustrates this point. See Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (New York: Metrobooks, 2002).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 82.

If our contract to respect individual rights determines social relations, then what institutions has God consecrated to preserve order and protect goods held in common? Hutcheson's response to this question engages interpersonal negotiations within the commercial sphere. Commercial life, like political life, is held together by the contracting will of marketgoers. Each marketgoer must recognize the basic rights of fellow marketgoers if economic exchange is to succeed nationally. So far, so Lockean. Hutcheson then departs from Locke, however, by rejecting the right of self-preservation as basic and positing instead a "right to hazard" on behalf of the public. This hazard, as Stephen Buckle has explained, "may require not only that we risk our lives, but that we surrender our *liberty*, to the extent of abandoning power over our lives to the authority of others."⁶⁵ It is under this basic right to hazard that Hutcheson envisages participation in the marketplace, where entering the marketplace implies that each is willing to give something up on behalf of another. To make his moral and political theory compatible he must insist that individual pursuit of industry is always ultimately an endeavour on the part of wider society. Self-interest, self-preservation is not a sufficient commercial motivator. Neither is one's industriousness simply a matter of obeying God's command to labour, as it was with Locke, but also of judging what is good for society. Only when industriousness is in conformity to the command of natural law is it good for society.

Property is a public necessity on Hutcheson's view because of population growth, which induces scarcity and intense competition over limited resources.⁶⁶ He turns the Lockean labour-for-property formula on its head, making property the location of labour *for* the common good and thus making room for additional property possessors. Yet he also maintains consistently that labouring for the common good is not a solitary commercial motivation; everyone also labours for the rewards, or fruits, it earns—"benevolence alone is not a motive strong enough to industry" and therefore requires incentives to prompt industry toward the common good.⁶⁷ Industry dries-up when separated from the promise of reward, for "depriving any person of the fruits of his own innocent labour takes away all motives to industry from self-love."⁶⁸ What he means here about industry deserving certain rewards is

⁶⁵ Buckle, *NLToP*, 223.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁶⁷ Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, II, vi, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

evident enough. Less clear, however, is why, unlike before, he seems suddenly malcontent with benevolence as a key motivator to commercial participation. His reason appears to be that relying exclusively on the affection of benevolence in commerce leaves it vulnerable to the preying apathy of slothful vagrants who suffocate industry and pit “self-love *against* industry.”⁶⁹ If after labouring nothing returns to you, then labouring always on behalf of others will naturally corrode the useful passions of industry and eventually exhaust itself.⁷⁰ This balancing act between miserliness and generosity is itself grounded in the unity of contracts, or covenants; because God covenanted with humankind we are able to see how covenanting with others establishes the formal shape of personal allegiances.

Political society emerges, therefore, from a mould pre-cut by commercial enterprise. In book three of his *System*, Hutcheson begins his assessment of civil polity by delineating the duties and rights inherent to three dominant forms of human relationship: husband to wife, parent to child, and master to slave. Each of the relations is defined by its natural appearance in the world. This assemblage of relations then leads Hutcheson to consider why, if these relations constitute the basis of society, civil government is necessary in the first place. If we all observe the rights of others and attend to our own personal duties, why is oversight still required? With unexpected Protestant bravado he suggests that its necessity arises “either from the imperfection or depravity of men, or both.”⁷¹ Although mankind joins together contractually by consent, there are often different views on the point of right and thus something must arbitrate politically the many competing interests. Of significant interest to us at this juncture is that competing interests are the causal impetus summoning third-party jurisdictions. By making covenants the most basic relation within political constitutions, Hutcheson has brought the political and economic orders into an alternative hierarchy, where the political is now pre-determined by its economic substance. I have a specific trading interest that competes with another’s trading interest; the task of the government is to then *respond* to this predicament with prudent and just restitution. God’s original covenant with Israel was singularly

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ The analogy this argument bears to current debates over state-funded welfare entitlements, particularly from those insist upon the injustice of handing over monies to those who are able but unwilling to labour, is plain enough.

⁷¹ *System of Moral Philosophy*, III,iv.

political—the chartering of a nation constituted by communion with its creating and delivering God. Hutcheson’s contract, on the other hand, is first an economic construction that then in a secondary movement employs the currency of rights to justify and sanctify political society. His covenantal arrangement substitutes ethical goods for economic utility, identifies providence with natural law, and leaves in fundamental tension the self-interestedness that produces action for the common good. We might therefore wish to put the question to Hutcheson: what exactly is the *ultimate* reward of an economic and political order so configured?

Turning to David Hume is, in some respects, to reach the crescendo of our inquiry, but on a flat note. Compared to our theorists above, Hume’s essays on commerce are vastly more sophisticated and draw much more deeply upon the history of political progress. I say “flat” because, unlike the contributors above, Hume’s thought altogether lacks any form of theological attention or support; so, although his reflections are surely among the more economically exacting of the period, they do not come without attending drawbacks. In reconstructing Hume’s theory of commerce it is important to recognize that God is only (at best) the ultimate grounds of existence—the Author—and plays no interesting role in domestic or international exchanges. What *is* theologically interesting at this juncture of our inquiry, however, is whether an uninvolved Deity makes any significant difference to the ordering of commercial life around certain moral and political goods. Does displacing God make a real difference to how the commercial sphere is conceived or to what object it is ultimately directed? Hume apparently thinks not, and so the outline that follows will address primarily on his theory of justice and identify how “artificial” virtues are appropriated in commercial society.

For Hume, artificial virtues of justice bridge the gap between natural virtues and participation in commercial life. Having already conducted a penetrating analysis of the mind’s understanding and passions—a “science of man”—Hume is poised to characterize justice as an “artificial” virtue because justice produces “pleasure and approbation by means of an artifice or contrivance, which arise from the circumstances and necessities of mankind.”⁷² Set within his wider moral argument valuing only the quality of motivations that cause action, justice must be designated

⁷² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), III,ii,1.

an artificial virtue precisely because of its fixed externality. The external character of justice, its unnatural artificiality, makes it impossible to sentimentalize. One feels the pleasure of justice or the pain of injustice and this habituates a posture of approval or disapproval. The virtue of justice is its ability to evoke passion. With motivations of self-love playing such a dominant role in the stage-play of human passion, the only way for Hume to incorporate justice into his moral theory as anything but a stagehand is for him to default to rational deliberation.⁷³ Because the feeling of justice is not a natural passion but merely a rational concept, justice is by definition an artifice. A dispositional slot must be carved out for justice within the congregation of human affections and this is ultimately achieved by accommodating the moral tension between pride and sympathy.

The energy of pride extends well beyond individual self-love or magnanimity and pervades the whole institutional structure of social life. Civil cohesion is itself achieved through pride's invisible bond inter-linking individuals into tighter, more interdependent communities. Pride is the passion that gets things done. Its usefulness to society is visible in its competence for civic improvement. Pride transforms the artificial virtue of justice into what Hume calls a "jealousy." His argument associating justice with jealousy is elaborated in part three of the *Treatise*, where immediately upon describing justice as an artificial virtue he begins lengthy treatment of the origins and rules of property.⁷⁴ He explains that "justice, in her decisions, never regards the fitness or unfitness of objects to particular persons, but conducts herself by more extensive views," and so regardless of the personal character of parties involved justice is equally present and equally authoritative.⁷⁵ Equity is the principle goal of justice. The question of how equity is to be discerned and each citizen treated according to its ideal leads Hume to propose private property an external anchor to social relations that remains free of arbitrary will. The stable institution of property organizes society by imposing unique boundaries and limits to what is mine and what is yours. It establishes necessary contrasts between persons; a type of custom that sets the terms on which persons and communities enterprise together over time. If another possesses more property than I jealousy is sparked and the competition for social ascendancy gets underway. Property and jealousy are,

⁷³ Buckle, *NLTP*, 287.

⁷⁴ *Treatise*, III.ii.2-4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, III.ii.3.

in this respect, mutually reinforcing. Hume's sense of justice is commercially conceived from the outset; the beginning of commerce is also the beginning of justice. Commerce seems infinitely promising, as "the *greatness* of a state and the *happiness* of its subjects...are commonly allowed to be inseparable with regard to commerce."⁷⁶ Such greatness and happiness cannot be achieved without private property. Hume's argument departs strongly from the Lockean model of land and labour—that land is integrated into the person by their labour—disparaging it as no longer serviceable to the purposes and methods of modern commerce at a higher plane. The material result of labour is not property, on Hume's view, but the material result of private property is labour.

By the mid eighteenth-century labour had diversified and could be applied to far more than mere agricultural subsistence. A whole new class of merchants and entrepreneurs had arisen as a result of domestic prosperity able to employ new labourers in new trades. Labour was by this time also industrial, which multiplied the amount of work available to be done and incorporated more hands to help enlarge revenues, and thus the cycle would continually repeat itself; more revenue would initiate refinements of commercial functions that make profit possible in the first place. All of what Hume calls "superfluity" should be re-applied to commercial pursuits so that still more property can be acquired and more hands put to work. Calling into question certain regulative practices of the time, Hume asks rhetorically why extra resources earned should be put to use by the sovereign? Why not apply extra resources, superfluity, toward refinements or luxuries? In posing the question this way Hume identifies a special dilemma in eighteenth-century economic policy. This legal and practical dilemma has to do with the accumulation of wealth: should monetary surpluses be channelled to royal accounts, or should they be permitted to multiply and disseminate to the public so as to cultivate additional refinements? Put thus, the tension points toward "a kind of *opposition* between the greatness of the state and the happiness of the subject."⁷⁷ Under past arrangements, where superfluity resulting from labour and trade was devoted to the sovereign and subsequently poured into his bottomless war chest, domestic happiness and international ascendancy were in perpetual conflict with one another. On the newer arrangement,

⁷⁶ David Hume, "Of Commerce," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 255.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 257 (emphasis mine).

however, if resources could be made serviceable to the refinement of arts and luxury, then returns on that investment would be gleaned with interest and the refinements that follow would lead to still greater refinements, and luxuries to still grander luxuries. Hume sharply criticizes the idea that putting superfluity into the hands of the sovereign makes better citizens and patriots by avoiding the corruptions of excessive wealth and exercising men in valorous masculine virtues which serve the state's political interest. In reality war siphons public happiness and functions much like a heavy tax; one vastly "less felt by those addicted to arms."⁷⁸ The political truth of applying superfluity to refinements is that "industry and arts and trade *increase* the power of the sovereign as well as the happiness of the subjects."⁷⁹ Commerce, if properly understood in terms of applying superfluity to the refinement of arts, actually eliminates the perennial conflict between greatness and happiness by promoting national greatness and increasing public happiness while *at the same time* avoiding the tragedies and expenditures of armed conflict. Natural law works to distil political tensions and paradoxes into social benefits and advantages.

The best way to multiply this coveted superfluity is by expanding international trade. By trading internationally a nation is likely to maintain the highest advantage in supply and demand ratios, while likewise avoiding the stagnation and disadvantage that typically defines strictly domestic exchanges. Hume's argument hinges on the *usefulness* of wealth: "where riches are in few hands, these must enjoy all the power, and will readily conspire to lay the whole burden on the poor and oppress them still further, to the discouragement of all industry."⁸⁰ The more widely distributed the wealth of any nation is among its people, the lighter the burden on each shoulder and the more capable it is of improving refinement and luxury. A blow to domestic advantage is felt wherever the freedom to trade is limited. But why, of all the reasonable commercial goals available, does Hume insist so adamantly on the pursuit of *luxury*? The answer to this question depends in large part on what "luxury" actually means. He suggests in the *Essays* that luxury represents "great refinement in the gratification of the senses [that] may be innocent or blameworthy according to the age, or country, or condition of the person."⁸¹ Luxury is a relative and uniquely

⁷⁸ Ibid., 259.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 260.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 265.

⁸¹ Ibid., 268.

moral subject that cannot be comfortably associated with virtue or vice, becoming overtly problematic only when it manifests significant excesses or deficiencies. On this latter point Hume displays his Aristotelian colours—the moral texture of luxury is woven together by a series of personal and circumstantial conditions that depend greatly upon moderation and approbation. Avoiding the dangers of wealth by “monkishly” renouncing it altogether is, for Hume, altogether foolish and categorically removes many opportunities for generosity and charity. Luxury in itself is “neither banal nor blessed”; neither purely mine nor purely yours, but ours to enjoy together.

As a point of clarification, Hume is certainly *not* asserting that the morals of wealth are derived only from its use. He is arguing, rather, that the morals of wealth apply *both* to what a person does with wealth as well as what wealth does to the person. This leads him to “correct popular opinions” of luxury’s corruptions by suggesting that ages of refinement are both the happiest and most virtuous, and that when luxury ceases to be innocent it thereby ceases to be beneficial.⁸² The assumption behind his concept of refinement is that the more refined a people become, the less they indulge in excesses—refinement involves a level of sophistication in pleasure seeking. One does not, for example, gamble one’s money away frivolously or use the better part of it on strong drink. No, the truly refined use wealth for still greater refinements, not trivial rewards. Were one to question whether refinement itself might over time lead to certain corruptions, Hume offers firm reassurance, “refinement of the pleasures and conveniences of life has *no* natural tendency to beget venality and corruption.”⁸³ Renouncing wealth voluntarily is therefore as imprudent as it is ignoble. If any viciousness in luxury exists it is observed only when its innocence sours in toxic excesses and proves itself pernicious. Here again Hume draws upon the Aristotelian polarities of excess and deficiency; indolence, selfishness, and inattention serve to implicate luxury, whether taking the form of the miser in his greed or the beggar in his spending. In their embodiment of the Aristotelian polarity both individuals may prove useful to common enterprise to the extent that both possess the passion for more, despite each having wished to apply earnings to different ends. Thus, Hume’s larger point is simply this: vice can be

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 276

advantageous. A moderate view of luxury and refinement provide, paradoxically, the means for further refinements and luxuries that are not rightly attributed to modesty. The remainder of Hume's economic essays—"Of Money," "Of Interest," and "Of Balance of Trade"—further outline the implications for his luxury-driven internationalism.

In essence, Hume has taken the early eighteenth-century problem of War and Commerce—war being engaged for commercial ends and commerce being engaged for the ends of war—and stripped it of its impoverished circularity by elucidating how international trade can lead to national ascendancy and domestic happiness *without* resulting to war.⁸⁴ In other words, he could perhaps be thought to say, "let the competitions of industry and international trade prove which nation truly has ascendancy!" In the Commercial Age greatness is no longer determined by military might or political savvy, but by economic standing and the ability of a nation to trade prudently for refinements. If we are to grant this thesis, however, by what means does a weak nation become strong or a strong nation become weak? How does this policy improve international inequalities? The weak state, explains Hume, becomes strong by trading with strong states that can be routinely undersold and thus bring the weak state to profit. The strong state, on the other hand, must simply take precautions not to risk irresponsible projects or to trade too narrowly with too few partners. This unique status of international prominence actually serves to stimulate jealousies between nations that perpetually reignite passion of industry. In this way trade between weak nations and strong serves as a natural leveller enabling justice to undergird commerce as a law of equity. Commercial exchange makes justice possible. In his superb essay "The 'Rich Country-Poor Country' Debate in the Scottish Enlightenment," Istvan Hont explains how Hume made use of this humanist "paradox" of wealth by showing how *virtù* and virtue cooperate in terms of "historic fate."⁸⁵ Like Pufendorf and Locke, Hume held that the human species individually and collectively progresses toward higher, more improved, and relatively superior states of being.⁸⁶ History is a story of human progress and so therefore our present

⁸⁴ On this point see Hont's "The Rhapsody of Public Debt" in *Jealousy of Dept*, 325-353. For further elaboration of the complexity of the War and Commerce paradox see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

⁸⁵ Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 268.

⁸⁶ For more on the wider significance of hierarchy of being and its manifold progress in the human species, especially in the eighteenth-century, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

age is more advanced than those temporally prior it precisely because it is not a society of the past. Particularly in his *History of England*, but elsewhere too, Hume routinely asserts the empirical fact of mankind's progressive nature.⁸⁷ The exact character of this progressive march is typically presented in terms of procedural or instrumental innovation, though the most salient features of this innovative progress in Hume's theory remain undeniably commercial. One has a specific need and is required to join forces with other human beings in the pursuit of those needs. Genius, diligence, and custom assist delicate progresses along until eventually the political authority is required to decide upon the greater liberation or greater regulation of trade. That decision was, in fact, the economic quandary of his day: should rulers liberate international trade, or should the rigid balance continue to be maintained? Hume's advocacy was for liberty, of course, but only because the progress of trade would lead to greater advantages and refinements. Progress therefore remained integral to the logic of Hume's commercial theory. Decay is simply a misnomer that makes its own contribution to personal and social excellences; a resistance that makes the muscle of economies all the stronger. International trade was seen as a natural leveller with an ever-increasing capacity to promote domestic happiness and encourage charitable support for the poor. As Hont explains, if the rich nation "prospered, and let their poorer neighbours also prosper, the whole international trading community of nations could face the future with optimism."⁸⁸ Thus, the *virtù* and the virtue of internationalism is that it distributes wealth naturally *if* industrious citizens are afforded the freedom to embark upon the market passionately with moderation and refinement in mind.⁸⁹

Justice therefore uses jealousy to establish equity. In establishing this connection Hume has shown how even in the external affairs of commerce passions remain the singular object of moral approbation or disapprobation. When granted the freedom to trade and to apply superfluity in refinement and luxury, the passions that constitute natural and artificial virtues serve domestic needs by creating wider international equality. Absolutely crucial on this view is that moderation can never be lost, or else

⁸⁷ David Hume, *The History of England: Volumes 1-6* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983). More on the progression of institutions is outlined in "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" and "Of Refinement in the Arts" in his *Essays*. On the non-institutional, personal level, Hume's progressivism is even latent to personal morals, as seen in his *Enquiries* and *Treatise*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁸⁹ See Haakonssen, *NLMP*, section 3.6.

the order that morality brings to commerce becomes increasingly strained or even fractured. Nevertheless, Hume maintains throughout his *Essays* that refinement and luxury encourage felicities that lead to national greatness and we need not worry about damages wrought upon morality. Hume thus rejects the method of applying the wealth-virtue dialectic to commercial growth and decay by turning the dialectic on its head: the pursuit of wealth is a virtue that, when given freedom, cannot corrupt but only mature. The classic and *biblical* notion that wealth corrupts virtue is entirely lost, for Hume is persuaded that wealth refines morals by deepening and enhancing the virtues needed to grow it. Virtue is, as it were, wealth's fertilizer. The question then becomes whether Hume's science of man can provide an ethic for commercial exchange without being forced to abandon a self-interested, passion-based theory. Would not a reliable or truthful ethic of commerce *transcend* passions? Why should anyone join Hume in his "prayers" for the commerce of Germany, Spain, Italy and France?⁹⁰

As we approach the year 1764, the last text to examine in our eighteenth-century philosophic overview is Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. What interests us about this particular text and its bearing on the central conceptual question regarding commerce and theology is the role given society in a moral philosophy narrowed to the description of sentiments. If ethics is fundamentally about the beginning and end of sentimental expressions, or about their conformity with law, or their intrinsic worth, how might an impassioned ethic align with proper participation in the commercial sphere? Can Smith account for commercial actions merely by describing the sentiments that encourage them? A potential response to this question can be identified in how sentiments are formed, what determines their quality, and to what they are ultimately directed. Taking this line will then lead finally to the question of commerce and theology, and whether Smith's system clarifies the moral order or contains any form of theological support.

Smith begins *TMS* with a remedy to the state of nature debate over whether human beings are most naturally inclined to self-love or to benevolence that suggests both are equally natural to human being. No matter how thoroughly selfish a person might be, he explains, "there are evidently some principles in his nature which

⁹⁰ "...I pray for the flourishing commerce of Germany, Spain, Italy, and even France itself" in "Of the Jealousy of Trade," 331.

interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him.”⁹¹ This “interest” in the fortunes of others is derived from an imaginative exercise wherein one comes to feel sympathy for another by seeing the other as one sees oneself, something Smith refers to as “fellow-feeling.” Sympathy is universal to humankind as a sense of “propriety,” or fittedness, because it arises from a “particular situation that excites it” and not from the passions only.⁹² Affections of sympathy must be externally evoked, since they are unlikely to be voluntarily manufactured. As an outcome of mutual sympathy, morals are scripted for society according to the Golden Rule; one is always being educated in how to render to others what they themselves would like to be rendered. Smith’s next move is to argue that true propriety depends entirely on the “suitableness” or “proportion” of the affections preceding the sequence of actions in question. The effects of action are then judged by their benefit or harm to society and in turn declared either meritorious or unmeritorious.⁹³ The task for every member of society is simply to learn how to sympathize with one another by gauging the passions giving judgments life.

To love one’s neighbour as oneself it is necessary to restrain the otherwise domineering passions of self-love that cripple sentiments of fellow-feeling at their beginning. Throughout *TMS* it is clear that self-command, the great marvel of stoicism, is considered a necessary precondition to sympathetic love and by extension also to the cohesion of civil society. Only when rampaging passions are brought under control can sensible judgments be reached on the true propriety, merit, or virtue of action. Judgment is thus central to Smith’s moral theory. Having explained why certain actions are approved or disapproved according to the level of sympathy they elicit, he then broadens the claim by insisting that society itself is founded upon flux of human passions. Society, in other words, is the amalgamation of both social *and* unsocial passions, some to unity and some to disunity. Every society strives to encourage social passions and thus tend toward a useful ultimate goal. Yet, there is also a third category of “selfish” passions, a “middle place” between the two antitheses of social and unsocial.⁹⁴ Selfish passions being concerned primarily with

⁹¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), I.i.1.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ I.i.3.

⁹⁴ I.ii.5.

happiness, and society itself being dependent on its members loving and being loved, senses of happiness and feeling loved must belong to one another and mean that “the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved.”⁹⁵ Smith explains happiness in terms of being “conscious” of recognition—“he is *happiest* who advances more gradually to greatness, whom the public destines to every step of his preferment long before he arrives at it.”⁹⁶ In this way happiness is earned and subsequently rewarded with public expressions of praise (approbation) that naturally marshals positive self-esteem, or indeed further happiness. Happiness is therefore bound to envy from its beginning, confining true human fulfilment to an ever retreating yearning satiated only by the recognition of others. People are naturally more inclined to sympathize with the happy and joyful than they are the sorrowful or angry, and this is why, thinks Smith, we “make a parade of our riches and conceal our poverty.”⁹⁷ Nothing is as terrifying as public embarrassment and nothing is so felicitous as public recognition; these sentiments cooperate to form the affective origin of ambition. No one wishes to be observed in poverty and everyone wishes to be seen as rich. To the former we attach shame; to the latter, pride. But it is the glories of the rich, their luxuries and rank that become primary motivation for personal improvement: “that kings are the servants of the people...is the doctrine of reason and philosophy...not the doctrine of nature.”⁹⁸ Society is naturally stratified. My aspirations differ from yours, and vary doubly in their unpredictable intensity. Half of all labours are devoted to improving one’s place in the social hierarchy, and although the wise would take no consolation in their position, the enticements of status beckon all persons equally, insatiable as they are for public worship.

Yet, and this is not a tension in Smith’s mind, ambition and rank remain necessary to the maintenance of social order while at the same time being “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.”⁹⁹ How could something necessary to society also be its “great and universal” corruption? The tension is a false one. The fact that envy, ambition’s partner, powerfully integrates society illustrated by society’s advancement throughout history. Like Pufendorf, Locke, and

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ I.iii.2.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ I.iii.3.

Hume, Smith roundly accepts the four-state theory of history as demonstrating obvious empirical truths about personal and civil development. He assumes individual capacities are improvable. All human faculties can be sharpened or enhanced with extra vigilance. Obvious counter-examples illustrating personal demise exist, of course, but on the whole it is evident, at least from Smith's later reflections in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, that both individuals and societies maintain courses of genuine advancement.¹⁰⁰ The four stages of this historical theory—Hunter, Shepherd, Agricultural, and Commercial—identify specific economic developments requiring special political compromises. What led ultimately to the transition from Hunter to Shepherd, for example, was the notion that objects could be personally possessed instead of only used. Likewise, the transition from Shepherd to Agriculture initiated when owners of flocks and herds realized they could also possess land. Following Hume's argument that property secures the conditions for justice, Smith seems to have believed not only that private property creates the conditions for justice, but that private property marks the beginning of civil authority itself. As some members come to possess and accumulate more objects than others, this leads naturally to the possession of territorial lands on which to house collected property. Monopolistic tendencies of accumulated property leads eventually to the institution of monarchy and, later, to despotic tyranny that inevitably foreshadows public revolution. In any event, what concerns us here is not so much the minute details of each stage as the generically progressive character of history and the economic demands that inaugurate political change. The story of history is the story of human improvement. Individuals yearn for higher status, societies yearn for great luxuries, and government must accept this progression, in the end, because it is humanity's natural aim.

Social hierarchy may be a static fixture, but how one utilizes ambition to improve social status may vary greatly from person to person. When one discovers that riches and status are as respected by society as the classic virtues of wisdom and courage, one is faced with a dilemma; either one may take the path of wisdom that leads to virtue, or one may take the path of wealth that leads to (apparent) greatness.¹⁰¹ In response to this dilemma Smith's strategy is much the same as before, commending

¹⁰⁰ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, eds. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

personal “mediocrity” that embraces the truth of both propositions, even if that means taking the path of wisdom for the *sake* of a path to wealth. Yet if virtue is lost to the pursuit of wealth and status, the corrupting passions of envy and covetousness motivating that pursuit may simultaneously *empty* the honour of having arrived at the destination for which one so adamantly longed. Smith sees no tension between virtue and wealth because of what moderation (“mediocrity”) can morally repair in commercial enterprise. On this point Smith follows the Humean (and Aristotelian) line, enshrining moderation and the negotiated middle between two extremes. Justice, too, is cast in Humean terms as a “sense” that serves to integrate society and affections while minimizing their incompatibility. What interests us about justice under this scheme is how resentment elicits public fervour to preserve justice. On Smith’s view, justice is not observable in its positive ontology or shape but in its negative *violations*. Justice serves only to hinder injuries and is mostly unimportant if “all the different members [of society] are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices.”¹⁰² This is how society would naturally arrange itself if injustice were altogether removed. The delight in love and resentment of injustice reveal nature’s two great purposes: the support of the individual and the propagation of the species.¹⁰³ The complementarity of these purposes—supporting the individual and propagating the species—bespeak the providence of a Deity who orders society according to his own design. “Fortune,” the term used by Smith to denote those events that are not a direct result of human intention, constitutes the other side of this providential coin. The fluctuations in circumstance, the unintended consequences of actions, and the multitude of various “accidents” give form to human experience while pointing toward cosmic governance beyond the reach of human predictability or control.

Following his treatment of justice and fortune, Smith turns his attention to judgment and to the sense of duty that encases moral conduct. To arrive at genuinely just judgments, the task is to objectify the moral self—to put oneself in the position of the other and reach an impartial decision based on those circumstantial contours. Smith’s notion of the impartial spectator allows for truly impartial judgments by

¹⁰² II.ii.3.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

removing all the colours of prejudice that malign authentic sympathy. One passes judgment on another *as* one would pass judgment on oneself. Contrary to Hume this means that motivations and passions are not the exclusive objects of moral valuation. Judgment passed on the motivation, quality, and effects of a given action are deemed either morally praiseworthy or blameworthy, approved or disapproved according to our one's *own* standards of self-approbation. This judicial office has been bestowed upon mankind by the Author of nature who, according to Smith, "has made man...the immediate judge of mankind; and has...created him after his own image and appointed him his vicegerent upon earth, to superintend the behaviour of his brethren."¹⁰⁴ Judgements passed on others in society are softened and polished by comparisons to the imaginary judgments one would pass on oneself under similar circumstances. The crucial point here, as above, is the centrality of the Self in Smith's moral theory. Sympathy, justice, and judgment are first conceived in terms of how one views oneself and in what regard the self is affected positively or negatively by others in society. This explains to some extent Smith's heavy reliance on the stoic doctrine of self-command. The man of truly perfect virtue is the one who unites self-love with self-command and holds them in steady balance. That person is perfect who flawlessly harmonizes competing affections between self and other. Renunciation occupies a central position in the moral constellation of civil society. Having established self-command as the only means to perfect virtue and thus to all moral beginnings, Smith introduces rules that cement self-command firmly into its political place. Rules express themselves as social customs imbedded in facts of history, as they did for Hume, and "when these general rules have been formed, when they are universally acknowledged and established by the concurring sentiments of mankind, we frequently appeal to them as standards of 'judgment'."¹⁰⁵ With time these rules become regarded as binding standards of duty, which evoke a sense of reverence compelling obedient conformity. Reverence is an understandable posture to take towards the rules of morality because, as reason and philosophy confirm, "those important rules of morality are the *commands and laws of the Deity*, who will finally reward the obedient, and punish the transgressors of their duty."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ III.ii.32.

¹⁰⁵ III.iv.11.

¹⁰⁶ III.v.3.

But because the rules and laws of God simply describe the origin of duty and the binding of civil society, a theory of sentiments is needed to expound more fully *how* rules and laws are obeyed in the first place. For Smith, the rules of morality, the binding commands of God, are imprinted on each and every person's moral faculties; they are, as described above, the "vicegerents of God within us," holding the happiness of mankind as an object of ultimate concern. Keeping happiness as an ultimate end, the moral faculties "may therefore be said, in some sense, *to cooperate with the Deity*, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence."¹⁰⁷ To do opposite, to not act according to our moral faculties, would be the same as obstructing the plans our Author has established for the happiness and perfection of the world and to likewise declare oneself enemies with God. In making this move Smith has thus eliminated the distinction between the commands of God and judgments of man and made the two indistinguishable. God has commanded precisely what the moral faculties most naturally desire—*happiness*. God's involvement in the world, the very reason for his universal benevolence, is "to maintain at all times the greatest possible quantity of happiness."¹⁰⁸

Returning, then, to the question of commerce in Smith's *TMS*, it is now clear that commercial participation in civil society is burdened with tensions and balancing acts. Selfishness must cooperate with sympathy, moderation must temper ambition, and envy must be perpetually monitored so as to encourage enough industry to stimulate improvement but not so much that it corrupts the integrity of virtue. Those moral corruptions that in the Christian tradition have been called sinful are on Smith's account wholly necessary functions of social cohesion and personal improvement. These are not assigned the status of sin in Smith's theory because each evil, whether of covetousness or envy, can nonetheless be made to serve the purposes of providence. In addition to making sin useful, providence also confers on mankind—with a benevolence that can only be described as universal—the greatest possible quantity of happiness. If one can refrain from injuring or wronging another, then one should feel free to pursue any commercial goals one's moral faculties authorize. The ultimate ends of wealth, rank, esteem, improvement, and happiness are all perfectly justified for their own sake, granted one exercises self-control and never injures

¹⁰⁷ III.v.7.

¹⁰⁸ IV.ii.3.

another person. In making status an integral part of ethics—indeed, the envisaged end of action itself—Smith establishes commerce as a necessary category of moral philosophy, consecrating a social hierarchy that incorporates ambition, luxury, and happiness into an absolute moral horizon. Thus, the commercial sphere serves as an *amoral* institution that generates the conditions of morality by establishing a hierarchical social structure in which all may improve and sympathize. But if improvement is our task and happiness our end, how is one ever to find, as George Turnbull put it, “*rest in the object pursued?*” Smith’s citizen cooperates with God to maximize a type of happiness that finds its highest enjoyment in the recognition and praise received from others. Individuals find completion in the act of worship, to be sure; only here it is found in the worship society offers to the *individual*, not the worship of the individual offered unto God. Is this a truly balanced view of self-love and benevolence? Was not one of Jesus of Nazareth’s earliest teachings to his disciples that they should *beware of practising piety before men in order to be seen by them* (Mt.6:1)?

III

One need not forget that though political and economic debates of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were widely continental in nature, Adam Ferguson—with whom we are, in the end, ultimately concerned—was himself a Gaelic-speaking Scot with deep commitments to national union and to newly formed Great Britain. Thus, defining the contextual backdrop to British philosophical discourses is crucial to discerning Ferguson’s own contribution to the tapestry. Moral and political questions do not arise *ex nihilo*, but from human confrontation with the complexities of real world affairs. Events from Germany or France would surely have been newsworthy north of the Tweed, of course; but it can hardly be doubted that those events lingering longest and leaving the greatest impression on late-century philosophers, and Ferguson in particular, are those occurring in one’s own town and country. For this reason it would be useful to conclude this contextual backdrop with a review of several critical events and debates of the early to mid eighteenth-century that have to this point gone largely unrecognized. So far we have taken in the philosophic mountaintops; here we want observe the topography of the valleys. Events and debates of interest cannot define comprehensively the nature of early-century political economy on their own merit, for that would be to expect too

much of them. But they can serve effectively in tethering otherwise unfettered political theory. At different heights and in different positions in the valleys we will want to note the following phenomenon: the 1707 Union of Parliaments, the South Sea Bubble, outbreaks of war, and lastly, the shape of theological debates. Once the valleys have been mapped we will find ourselves in the position to turn an informed eye to Adam Ferguson.

As with any period of history decisions on where properly to begin one's historiography seem always to require an artificial line of demarcation. In this case, to speak of the 1707 union of parliaments one feels obliged to mention the prior union of crowns in the same breath. The Glorious Revolution—which hardly supports the ascription of “revolution,” since its beginnings were largely a matter of political expediency following James II abdication—initially encouraged Scottish hopes that their recent economic hardships might at long last find relief. But relief would remain lamentably elusive, as Scotland beheld in the years that followed a series of investment disasters and crop failures. National poverty quickly reached levels of national crisis and it became increasingly evident that the government would finally be forced to cast its eye beyond its borders for lasting assistance.¹⁰⁹ Relief came (somewhat ironically) in the form of legislation battles with the same English parliament that helped precipitate its fiscal struggles at the turn of the century. In response to the English Act of Settlement in 1703, a bill legally codifying Hanoverian succession, the Scottish parliament felt obliged to pass its own legislative measures: the Act of Security and the Act anent Peace and War. The former bill was meant to communicate the Scottish position that it would not accept Hanoverian succession unless its parliament, Kirk, and commerce were free from interference. The latter bill, on the other hand, the Act anent Peace and War, promised war-making powers to parliament in the event of Queen Anne's death. Neither bill was well received in London. So, to bring the legislative exchange full hilt, Westminster responded with the Alien Act of 1705, which forced Scotland to decide upon legal incorporation with England or face subjection to the same

¹⁰⁹ The enormous economic impetus for union on the part of Scottish magistrates has often been linked to poor harvests and the catastrophic effects of the Darien failure. Contemporary historiography on the immediate background to union has sought to expand and clarify both these and further rationale for union and suggested new non-commercial motivations. For an excellent example see Allan Macinnes, *Union and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially part three.

commercial sanctions as their continental neighbours. Scotland was not in the comfortable position to negotiate. English Navigation Acts put into effect several years prior had already placed great strain on the revenues of Scottish traders and tax-gathering had become so dreadfully disorganized and unreliable that low annual revenue figures jeopardized even the basic execution of government. Perhaps as an act of desperation, or perhaps in hope of energizing an apathetic domestic economy, in 1695 Scotland launched its first major colonial effort under the auspices of the Company of Scotland. The Darien Scheme, as it came to be called, was a famous and monumental disaster. Of the roughly 1200 original settlers that set sail to the Isle of Isthmus approximately 300 survived to return home, a tragedy only deepened by the irrecoverable loss of nearly one-fifth the pledged capital for the venture. Meanwhile, just when the story could not seem to get any worse, four consecutive years of harvest failure compromised even the country's economic mainstay, agriculture. This financial blow subsequently required heavy borrowing on the part of Scottish nobles whose debt totals quickly bordered illegality. At an economic level, Scotland lacked the free hand to disentangle its many economic bindings.

Formal union would remain elusive during these early-century legislation battles not because Scottish or English representatives were opposed to union on principle but because the terms of union had yet to reach an agreeable compromise. More often than not the terms of settlement were negotiated behind the scenes in the form of strategic bribes, where deeply indebted Scottish magistrates conveniently found the Act of Union to be both politically necessary and personally advantageous. Scottish parliamentarians were perhaps too frequently guilty, as the popular limerick chided, of being "bought and sold for English gold."¹¹⁰ Yet bribery was a common enough political instrument—as it is now, of course—not to merit fierce disapproval; this is, after all, "how things are done!" Nevertheless, it remained true that though union seemed inevitable on political and economic grounds, the ecclesiastical ramifications of union repeatedly dowsed progress at the bargaining table. Perhaps more than any other singular issue the ultimate success or failure of the Treaty of Union depended almost entirely upon provisional legal security for the Church of

¹¹⁰ For a commendably cautious assessment of the real extent of bribery behind the negotiation of articles see Christopher Whatley, *'Bought and Sold for English Gold'* (Dundee: Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1994.)

Scotland against absorption into the Church of England.¹¹¹ The Kirk remained unwavering in its commitment to Presbyterian polity however, and in the end their resolve paid off, the Kirk was given legal status as the established Church of Scotland.¹¹² Of the twenty-four articles of the Treaty of Union, only courts, church, and civic appointments would remain untouched by statutes of incorporation.¹¹³ Thus, despite economic pressures compelling passage of legislative union, without “The Act for Securing the Protestant Religion and Presbyterian Church Government” amending the original articles, it is likely an enduring treaty may never have been achieved.

The significance of Union is in what it represents: “the Treaty of Union can be divided into three components—the articles for constitutional arrangements, those for economic issues and those for preserved Scottish institutions.”¹¹⁴ Each component would uniquely transform the socio-political orientation of Scotland, just as each would introduce its own aftermath. The point for our purposes is simply to note that the Union was a cardinal event. In the following decades even those establishments the articles expressly sanctified, especially those concerning the Kirk, would be forced to endure reconfigurations of authority under the newly accommodating government of Great Britain. It is the event in which events of later decades all have roots—a lens bringing clarity to ensuing political confusion.

The South Sea Bubble is iconic primarily because of its prominence among the many other early eighteenth-century financial scandals. Beginning in 1710, the task of expanding public credit became a central political issue and intense subject of

¹¹¹ Colin Kidd’s work develops even more broadly the important distinction between national ‘union’ and mere ‘absorption.’ *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500-2000*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For the contrary position, see T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (London: Fontana Press, 1969) p.200.

¹¹² Recent work on the relationship between Kirk and parliament during negotiations of the twenty-four articles shows that the special council appointed by the General Assembly to represent the interests of the Kirk were in fact far less contentious and demanding than has often been thought. Jeffrey Stephen’s argument has been that the Kirk council showed demonstrable caution and that the calling for a season of prayer and fasting is, in point of fact, an illustration of the true position of the Kirk—patience. Requests were made before the parliamentary committee, of course, but these petitions are not rightly considered overly-demanding or catalysts of dissent. The sheer abundance of evidence provided from Kirk records makes Stephens’s account all the more compelling. See *Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union, 1707*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

¹¹³ That so little ink and so few pages would be required to legally unite two disparate parliaments from two distinct nations may well astonish the modern magistrate. *Treaty of Union of the Two Kingdoms of Scotland and England* (London: Nelson, 1950).

¹¹⁴ *Union and Empire*, 314.

debate among “new money” gentlemen.¹¹⁵ Finance reform became the coffeehouse problem of the day: how was domestic industry to be firmly supported when unreliable public credit and ongoing conflicts with France and Spain threatened basic solvency? Who, exactly, originally devised the financial strategy for the South Sea scheme remains unknown, but there is little doubt that it would not have been established at all had it not been supported by several key financiers and parliamentarians.¹¹⁶ From its inception in 1710 to its legal enactment in 1711 the directors of the Company were ardent both in defence of its legitimacy as well as in promotion of its ever-increasing stock value. Legislation establishing the Company in 1711 settled two critical provisions: monopoly status and annual financial support from the Exchequer at a sum of nearly six hundred thousand pounds. The consecration of the Company reflects, as one commentator has described it, “a marvellous synthesis of finance, commerce, and foreign policy.”¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, despite its fierce apologies and promotions the South Sea scheme was always only a clever veneer concealing the nasty manipulations of its handlers. Not only were there no uninvolved banks or parliamentary authorities overseeing or back-checking Company books, the central backers themselves had absolutely no experience whatsoever with South American or West Indian trade.¹¹⁸ Whether the company was actually *successful* in its trans-Atlantic exchanges remained almost entirely unchecked and uncontested; it seemed unlikely to most that the great revenues already made from South American trade would uncharacteristically seize-up at any time in the near future. The question of *how* this unique capital venture was to be sustained long-term was too frequently met with silence, and much to the chagrin of opposition party members, especially Lord Walpole. Nevertheless, the scheme continued to add exorbitant sums to the purses of its directors for the better part of the decade; all rather conveniently overlooked while its stocks soared and credit increased broadly. By the spring of 1720, however, burgeoning share values

¹¹⁵ Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689-1798*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 309.

¹¹⁶ It is possible, if not likely, that the scheme was devised by the same William Patterson that organized and speculated upon the disastrous Darien Scheme of the late 1690's; though the Earl of Oxford is credited with the responsibility of organizing the South Sea scheme thereafter. See John Carswell, *The South Sea Bubble* (London: Cresset Press, 1960), 53.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 58.

ignited public alarm and an insidious run on trading that finally climaxed in August of that year with a yield increase of nearly one thousand percent. When the dust settled it became evident that from this point there was nowhere to go but down. Stocks fell in incremental slumps over the remainder of the year until Lord Walpole and finance ministers intervened with a sophisticated plan to prosecute the principal directors of the Company and stabilize public credit by leaning debts on the Bank of England.

The finer details of how the South Sea scheme was organized, perpetuated, and finally resolved are less relevant to the present inquiry than what the scheme discloses about the context of its occurrence. If there is a moral to the South Sea story it is found in the speculative nature of business finance that characterizes commerce of the period. Once the door to this brand of fiscal speculation had been thrown open—a brand lacking requirements of regulative oversight or even practical wisdom of how such a “business” was to be properly carried out—innumerable schemes of similar stock followed on its methodological heels.¹¹⁹ As a general trend, the years approaching 1720 made it seem “as if the whole nation had turned to stock-jobbers.”¹²⁰ The gains made by many speculators, particularly in London, quickly gave the appearance that anyone could surrender their monies to the trading companies and see a profit; dreams of effortless dividends enticed the investment of the lowest commoner to the highest landed gentry. Naive journalism did not alleviate matters in this regard.¹²¹ Speculation entrenched itself as part of the commercial culture and new money-making strategies continued to find traction within all mercantilist political economies plump with capital until well into the 1750’s, when desecration of mercantilism found a ready audience. Thus, when John

¹¹⁹ Charles Mackay lists no less than eighty-six different venture companies following on the heels of the South Sea model. See *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. (New York: Metro Books, 2002), 58. Hereafter *EPDMC*.

¹²⁰ *EPDMC*, 52. Mackay then goes on to explain that “...the public mind was in a state of unwholesome fermentation. Men were no longer satisfied with the slow but sure profits of cautious industry. The hope of boundless wealth for the morrow made them heedless and extravagant for today. A luxury, till then unheard of, was introduced, bringing in its train a corresponding laxity of morals. The overbearing insolence of ignorant men who had arisen to sudden wealth by successful gambling, made men of true gentility of mind and manners blush that gold should have power to raise the unworthy in the scale of society.”

¹²¹ Journalistic support and political cartoons were perhaps the greatest contributions to the Company’s artificially burgeoning stock. See Carswell (p.55) and Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Many of Langford’s texts on English commercialism in the eighteenth-century contain a variety of illustrative political cartoons.

Brewer describes eighteenth-century speculation as vapid, one finds it hard to disagree:

The eighteenth-century speculator had all the opportunities—legitimate or otherwise—available to the modern ‘market-maker’: the easy raising of capital for public or private funds; the simple, reliable and swift purchase and sale of stocks, shares and securities; dealing in futures and on the margin; insider trading; the creation of paper companies; and the covert manipulation of stock. Only the technology to speed these transactions was missing.¹²²

We shall set aside for the time being the philosophical interest garnered by the unique interdependency of war and political economy which shall directly occupy our inquiry later and focus primarily on the armed conflicts of the period, particularly the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, the concurrent War of Jenkins’ Ear, and the Seven Year’s war (1754-1763). Echoing the seventeenth-century, conflict with Spanish or French forces reverberated throughout the early eighteenth-century. Many British battalions were almost permanently barracked throughout continental Europe for the better half of the century. Indeed regimens were stationed all over the globe, from naval blockades in the south Indian to strategic fort occupations on remote North American frontiers, the British military, like other dominant European powers, sought diligently to protect and promote its interest wherever it felt challenged. By consequence its domestic armies were spread alarmingly thin.

It was precisely this domestic military scarcity that inspired the Stuarts to return to Britain to claim their rightful throne. Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745 are often characterized as the outcome of geographically divided political opposition between highlanders and lowlanders, the martial continuation of an embittered battle between Whigs and Tories. As regards the Fifteen, while it is true that the rebellions hearken to a remnant of the past embodied firmly by the Stuart line, it is not at all clear that the Jacobite cause had only party interests as motivation. Following the treaty of union, Tories faced a series of political defeats that by 1714 had seen their loss of power in Westminster and, in some extreme cases, prompt exile to continental Europe to avoid legal prosecution. With the unexpected death of Queen Anne and the slow devolution of power among Tories the stage was set for the climax of political theatre—the act of armed conflict. The scene would fail to materialize,

¹²² John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783*. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 250.

however, as the Fifteen was put down by the end of the year and Whigs quickly seized command of political advantages in Westminster.

Risings and revolutions continued throughout subsequent decades and came to completion with the rise and fall of the Forty-five. Not greatly dissimilar from the Fifteen, the Forty-five also sought to enthrone a Stuart monarch, only this time Prince Charles, accompanied by greater resources and experienced military strategists. The assembled army marched through southern Scotland and northern England long enough for the Young Pretender's arrogance to undermine his authority and be handed brutal defeat at Culloden. This defeat, in effect, ended the threat of Jacobitism in Britain. But this account slightly oversimplifies the conflict. There remains an inner meaning to Jacobitism located in the deeply religious motivations that elevate it as a cause worth dying for. Jacobitism is not easily reducible to tired disagreements between Whig and Tory, or between sympathizers of Stuart or Hanover lines. Eighteenth-century Jacobitism is a question of divine right, and thus is not merely a story about what party or family shall rule but what *counts* as an authority.

Ferguson's Sermon in Ersh Language, given to the Black Watch on the occasion of young Prince Charles' invasion from the north is a superb example of how debates surrounding rebellion were politically and *theologically* conceived in the eighteenth-century. Ferguson takes as his text 2 Samuel 10:12: *Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God....* We must end the passage with an ellipsis because Ferguson elected not to include the end of the verse in his sermon—"may the Lord do as he wills." Given the context and underlying intention of the sermon, it is not difficult to see why. Ferguson was addressing a regiment ordered to fight against their very own highland kin; brother against brother, cousin against cousin, father against son; for many in the regiment, the order to defend Britain against the Jacobite threat was also an order to slay one's very own flesh and blood. The young Pretender, Prince Charles, had succeeded in uniting the clans and had to that point executed a productive campaign in and around the border country. Like his father before him, Charles couched his rebellion in terms of Divine Right, claiming Divine favour for his revolt and insisting upon King George's prompt abdication.

The import of Ferguson's sermon lies in its contextual significance and in the subtlety of its argument. How does a chaplain ask a soldier to slaughter an army

comprised partly of his kin? What theological principles or biblical insight does one draw upon to persuade a clannish people to resist their own on behalf of another? In Ferguson's response, issued on a day consecrated as a "solemn day of fast," we see him offer a word of exhortation and a word of instruction. The word of exhortation springs from the riches of the text itself: *be of good courage and let us play the men for our people*. He explains that "it is the duty of every man to defend his country when in danger," Britain being their presumed *patria*. When one enjoys the government bestowed by an orderly and judicious state, then one accepts tacitly that government and is obliged to serve it when violent circumstances arise. To fight the approaching army is, moreover, an occasion to exercise noble virtues of courage and excellence and to uphold one's patriotic duty. This is civic "patriotism" in the truest sense of the word—a devotion to the land of one's fathers. His word of instruction, on the other hand, comes as a critique of the Pretender's violent revolution. What appears like a sensitive problem of interfamily conflict at the outset of his sermon, in the end, receives a rather terse refutation: "If you oppose your acquaintances, it is to prevent their ruin; if you oppose your relations, it is to save them and their posterity from slavery forever." Colour and flair of the sermon notwithstanding, the sharpest point of Ferguson's message cuts deeply into the rationale of the Stuart's claim: Providence expresses itself in government by way of order, not by right. The Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 symbolize a disagreement not merely about familial succession or party commitment, therefore, but about ecclesiastical affiliation and who truly rules the earthly kingdom.

The Seven Year's war and War of Jenkins' Ear, alternatively, were far less theologically pregnant. In fact, theology seems to have little at all to do with either war on either front. While both wars paralleled previous conflicts in their underlying economic motivations, each differed slightly from past conflicts in their relation to political theology as such. These mid-century conflicts helped elevate British military power to "its eighteenth-century zenith."¹²³ Prior to the Treaty of Paris in 1763, "Britain not only managed to check French power in Europe but also became a great colonial and commercial power."¹²⁴ Swelling national pride organized itself around the perceived supremacy of British militarism and great successes of colonial

¹²³ *The Sinews of Power*, 174.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

expansion. That the century is at all times dominated by impending or actual warfare does not appear to have gravely aggravated national sentiments. By mid-century, war was viewed as a necessary evil—a political fixture serving instrumental roles in bringing order to people and nations. The success of the Seven Year's war elevated Britain's international dominance, yet within the broader context of the early eighteenth-century war remained an omnipresent theme. This militarism, as will be seen below, is woven into the very fabric of politico-economic theory of the century.

In rehearsing the theological debates leading up to Ferguson's appointment our comments must remain generic and aim at parsing the layers each debate or issue included. We have already noted the theo-political character of the '15 and '45 Jacobite rebellions. Included within the claim to divine right, however, is a covenantal supposition: the divine right of kings relies on a presumed familial covenant with God for its doctrinal legitimacy. The question, as mentioned above, was not whether God authorized political authority, but how authority was to be lawfully asserted. Covenant was therefore a lingering theological debate for the better part of the eighteenth-century, especially when debates skirted political intrigue. Francis Hutcheson, for example, seems to have conceived of Lockean contract in *terms* of covenant, as though the two were synonymous with one another. Hutcheson's conception of society is perhaps indicative of the eighteenth-century Protestant view of providentially authorised socio-political integrity; covenant helped make contract theologically palatable. The issue of divine right and social covenant were, however, merely two strands of a much wider eighteenth-century debate over the nature and function of providence. Newtonian world-pictures threw metaphysics into disfavour and initiated revisionist theories of natural law, virtue, and even divine redemption. With time it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between philosopher's use of "providence" and "natural law"; natural law seemed empirically to be the providential mode. However, the deist threat had not yet been fully realized and would remain unrealized until the turn of the nineteenth-century. Questions of God's activity in the world bore directly on the basic religious experience of every believer. If God's will is expressed most elegantly in the natural law, then how is one to understand the experience of God? "Superstition" and "enthusiasm" became the iconic pillars of ecclesial debates surrounding this very question. In the former, experience of God is mediated through sacraments, icons, relics, or even pilgrimages; anything which might serve as a conduit of spiritual communication. Enthusiasm, on the other hand, referred to the direct and unmediated physical

experience of God, distilling all of the Christian life into a series of observances for the purpose of privileged experience. In some extreme cases worship itself become associated with the sensual enjoyment of God. As a generic summary of the theological debates, we might say that the tendency was to re-imagine the old in light of the new and to identify divine *telos* or commandments with the experience of natural law. Creation under human dominion gradually improves and progresses; the tradition of Christian obedience narrows to pure conformity with the physical demands of natural law achieved through moderation of passions; and the binding authority of law and government condenses into empirically verifiable patterns of how the world works, and in particular, how societies unite and flourish. The tendency in eighteenth-century theology is to clarify what God accomplished in his initial creative act by interpreting contemporary circumstances as expressions of his possible intentions. Theology thus becomes worldly in all the wrong ways.

As a way of bringing all the above events into conceptual unity it is essential to note that no single combination of events, no matter how sophisticated the argument, can alone be said to comprise or constitute the backdrop of eighteenth-century Britain. Historians must content themselves with events leaving the greatest cultural impression, those demanding some form of intellectual response. Truly monumental events invite reflection and speculation. Although the Act of Union, South Sea bubble, almost perpetual warfare, and theological debates are among the more seminal themes of the first half of the eighteenth-century, they by no means stand-alone. One could go on to mention other crucially important features of the period, like the Patronage act of 1714, decisive parliamentary debates in Westminster, the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755, or the many innovations brought to industrial technology.¹²⁵ Events being innumerable, the historian's task is simply to identify what makes any event significant. Once an event becomes the object of historical interpretation the task then becomes one of *intellectual* historiography. Thus, what interests us here is the extent to which early eighteenth-century events invite or evoke theoretical reflection, and in moving now to the conclusion of this

¹²⁵ Interestingly, this is a point with important relevance to chapter two on the meaning of history. In his article "Optimism, Progress, and Philosophical History," Haydn Mason suggests that the Lisbon earthquake (1755), Seven Years War (1756-63), and Voltaire's *Candide* were of some particular importance to the eventual forfeiture of "optimism," which "by the 1760's...had largely run its course." In *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195-217.

chapter it has become increasingly clear how and when events and ideas interpret and disclose one another. History is neither exclusively material, nor exclusively idealist, but a narrative generated by the repeated communication between the two.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to address the question of theological backgrounds to early eighteenth-century theories of commerce. As a way of organizing a response to this question we have heard from multiple voices within this tradition and have sought to identify the continuities and discontinuities, the receptions and rejections, contributing to the broader meaning of the period. Recalling the moral and political philosophers of the period we have noted the theological backdrop against which the central concepts are defined and have sought to interpret them in light of implicit, pre-existing commitments. One of my contentions has been that, with the exception of Hume, the moral and political thought of the period retains a great deal of theological attentiveness. This thought is not without tensions or paradoxes, of course; but neither can it be bracketed off into pan-century descriptors. Historical investigation of this roughly fifty-year period has revealed attempts to comprehend the shape of moral and political theology *in light of* natural law, and in particular, the increased development of commerce and industry. More “extra” and “superfluity” were becoming available for an ever-greater proportion of citizens and could be applied to a still greater variety of “refinements.” In this sense, then, much like other periods in the history of philosophy, the treatises are a product of their time.

Providence was understood predominantly in terms of natural law established by the faculty of reason and by justifications derived from an original teleological design. The world appears to operate in such-and-such a way and to such-and-such an end, and by these appearances is duly judged as natural or unnatural, providential or artificial. What emerges from this view of the world is a concept of providence *identical to* human judgments upon advantages or benefits arising from the mind, civil society, or the natural world. If something seems advantageous or beneficial to me, to civil society, or to the natural world, then that thing or event must be providential, seeing as *every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning* (Jm.1:17). And it is precisely in light of this understanding of providence that what had traditionally been considered wrongdoing within the Christian tradition could on this account become a

God-send. Envy and covetousness, for example, became viewed as essential to social cohesion and instrumental to the machine of industry. Righteousness, the other side of the polarity, became viewed as conformity to law, a masculine virtue approved and conferred by the public. Sin and righteousness were reinterpreted by many theorists of the period in a way categorically detached from a Christian origin or content. Sin is no longer a transgression against God, but an injury to the accepted norms of public happiness. Righteousness is no longer associated with salvific grace, or the heart of God, but with conformity to the erected standards of institutions and customs. Manoeuvring sin and righteousness into new positions meant that justice, too, would require readjustment, which it typically received in a manner of conceptual subordination to the possession of property. By making property a condition of justice—indeed its’ very starting point—an instrument of commerce dislodged justice as a traditionally overarching political fixture. Justice becomes defined in terms of distribution and a definite lack of moderation. But, ironically, this notion of justice was by no means all-inclusive. Some, like Turnbull, viewed equality as idealistic and utopian, while others, including Hume, depicted equality as a real political possibility created by extensive commercial growth. By 1764, although ranks in society were seen as essential to its lasting cohesion, theorists could not at the same time resist the enchantments of equity and thus fell into the unavoidable tension of advocating a necessarily stratified society and its endless pursuit of equality. Viewed *historically* this was not a tension in the slightest. The progressive advancement of mankind through the ages is a story of superseding commercial epochs. For Hume and Smith, concepts like justice and authority are themselves shaped by the overwhelming momentum of commercial improvement and thereby lead to a state of affairs in which commerce *precedes* political authority as a commanding power. Divine providence is viewed within this conjectural model of history as a more or less redemptive and sanctifying power. Such a notion no doubt reflects certain commitments to Christian orthodoxy—to make right and to make holy, for example—but is not an adequately discriminating account of providence. *What*, exactly, is God redeeming? *What kind* of improvements can or should be rendered? Here the meaning of history becomes a story of an inevitable future, where refinements seek only further refinements, luxuries still greater luxuries, and innovations to still higher innovations. This progressive improvement, readers are told, is ultimately what makes one happy.

The above treatment has not investigated all the rooms that comprise the storehouse of eighteenth-century theological reflection, nor has it claimed to. The

aim, as stated at the outset, has been to provide a contextual backdrop against which to hold the moral and political theology of Adam Ferguson. In approaching the year 1764 we have also come to Ferguson's first professorial appointment and to the beginnings of his formal contribution to the intellectual landscape of the period. The voices we have reviewed may remain Ferguson's theoretical interlocutors, to be sure, but the more pressing question is whether Ferguson fits the early-century mould. What are *his* questions? Do providence, sin, property, and history maintain the same character for Ferguson as they did for his predecessors?

Chapter 2

The Meaning of History

What *is* history? In posing this question we shift our focus from the early part of the century to its middle and from a widely continental scope to an expressly Scottish. Here in the eighteenth-century Scottish burghs historical interests recapture philosophical imaginations. But because we are attempting to project ourselves imaginatively into the eighteenth-century Scottish purview, the question that precedes our original question—“what is history?”—should be carefully rephrased: What was history for the mid-century *Scotsman*? How did history present itself to the classically educated, religiously attuned, and politically involved theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment? What were their vexing historical questions? Adopting a historical methodology was not easy. Theorists were concerned both with what happened in the past, as well as how best to narrate what had happened in the past, differentiating closely between occurrences and interpretation of occurrences. By attempting to take the Scottish questions as our own it will be useful first to identify why, exactly, history emerged from the shadows of natural philosophy when it did. Adam Ferguson was not the first to attempt retrieval of this semi-forgotten subject, and because he was not the first, retracing how the study of history was revived by the likes of Lord Kames, David Hume, William Robertson, and Adam Smith becomes all the more important. Capturing how these theorists conceived of history and its method will provide a stark contrast for underscoring Ferguson’s uniqueness and therefore provide an apt theoretical starting point for this essay. If Scottish thought of the period is concerned ultimately with the meaning of history and not merely its austere and static factuality, then what might history mean for Adam Ferguson in particular?

This essay will seek to identify two generic themes in Ferguson’s philosophy of history—Metaphysics and Institutions—and use them as guideposts by which to explore more specific conceptual territories. Unconvinced as he was that the Newtonian portrait of a strictly law-governed universe offered the only truthful representation of the world, Ferguson did not abandon metaphysical thinking

altogether for the simple reason that the study of history itself seemed to demand it of him. Metaphysical contours of history are defined by several acute polarities, or dialectics, that help uncover the hidden meanings of history. In suggesting history has metaphysical shape we are reminded of characteristics not immediately perceptible or comprehended, always pointing to something beyond itself. If history is at all metaphysical, then by definition it cannot be explained in *purely* physical terms; philosophical contemplation becomes the principal tool of historical investigation. With a basic sketch of history's metaphysical shape we may then turn to the concrete theme of Institutions. History cannot remain wholly abstract if it is to retain meaningful content. As a chronicle of what has happened in the world it is vital that metaphysical reflections map onto concrete political realities. Institutions are the flesh enlivened by a metaphysical soul legitimating history's mode of presentation to humankind. The task for our purposes is not to identify and list modern institutions—a tedious and redundant method—but rather what they meant to our predecessors, what they mean to us, and what they might mean for generations to come. When can we be assured that some idea or event is truly meaningful? If the significance of institutions that either endure or disappear in history is established by their talent for disclosing meaning, then what is it about an institution that, as it were, changes things?

An institution's affecting change or being changed itself inaugurates an interruption of otherwise steady routines in worldly life. The question for most eighteenth-century historians was what advantages followed, or were implied by, these institutional shifts. On this point Ferguson takes bold departure from his fellow Scots: history is *not* the story of humanity's progress from savage to citizen; it is not inherently progressive and cannot establish contemporary superiority over the past. As becomes clear with his treatment of the ancient Romans and North American savage, history does not symbolize a series of interrelated narratives of an advancing or improving humanity. Ferguson's judicious treatment of history offers a richly textured hermeneutic that successfully accommodates certain types of progress and improvement yet resists declaration of superiority. Not even commerce, the Scottish school's dominant institutional force for progress, can explain the transitory character of politics and society. Commerce is one institution among many. Ferguson's critique of conjectural histories enlisting commerce as a primary catalyst for institutional progress focuses on the moral limits of economic exchange. Are there moral costs to the unyielding pressure for commercial gain? Is the good to be

sought in interpersonal exchanges reducible to increased refinements and luxuries on the widest possible scale? Ferguson's exposition of history through the interpretive themes of Metaphysics and Institutions accentuates the mistake of viewing commerce as the primary vehicle of progress in political society. The *redemptive*, as opposed to conjectural, history of God's providence unmask the myth of progress by revealing history's true Power. The meaning of history both proceeds from and returns to God himself. To better understand how Ferguson made his way to this conclusion we should now revisit the inner logic of the proposed themes and contrast them with views of his contemporaries.

Scottish School of Conjectural History

The staggering proportion of historical literature published by Ferguson's Scottish colleagues in the mid to late eighteenth-century is nearly unparalleled in scale; each writer—Hume, Robertson, Kames, and Smith, for example—producing reputable historical treatises of excruciating length and detail.¹²⁶ Each work differs from the other perhaps only in subject. But it is the scale, the sheer overwhelming quantity of historical texts that first attracts the reader's attention. The impressive number of monographs reveals intense fixation with the finer details of historic facts; scrutinizing every event and idea, arranging each factoid within a theoretically reconstructed state of affairs became the methodological norm. But because the story of history was comprised essentially of facts, those facts could also be recreated in the present to communicate certain truths about the nature of human existence, especially man's capacity for making history itself. The more facts were collected, the fewer the errors or defects, the more pure and accurate the finished product. Scale came to symbolize extreme attentiveness and precision.

Facts of history narrate a story of progress when properly organized and outfitted to take their role in the plot of the historical saga. Dugald Stewart, the late

¹²⁶ David Hume, *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, Vols. 1-6 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983); *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987); Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, James ed. A. Harris (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007); William Robertson, *History of Scotland*, Vols. 1-2 (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996); *History of America*, Vols. 1-3 (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996); Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Vols 1-2, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981); *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, eds. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).

contemporary of Scottish School historians and Adam Smith's biographer, felt proud enough with the ambitious achievements of these historians to ascribe their model the special status of "conjectural history."¹²⁷ The ideological background to this version of progressive history—a history signalling the perpetual improvement and advancement of humankind—was first inherited from Gershom Carmichael, the Scottish publicist of Pufendorf's *De Officio*.¹²⁸ *De Officio* had made a case for the basic sociality of humankind and its subsequent progress through "four stages" of commercial advancement. This idea of irreducible sociality and its commercially driven progress proved enormously appealing to later Scottish historians. Scottish reception of the Four-stage theory was not unqualified, however. As Istvan Hont has explained, members of the Scottish school (especially Smith) were not aiming to redefine commercial society as such, but endeavouring "to integrate the fragmented aspects of Pufendorfian natural jurisprudence into a single theory of the history of civilization."¹²⁹ Theoretical foundations of a fundamentally commercial society were "already fully present" in Pufendorf's jurisprudence.¹³⁰ But it was the *history* of this union between commerce and civilization that augmented Scottish imaginations. In redefining the history of society as essentially commercial Pufendorf made a sharp break from Grotius' theory of natural law, modifying it so drastically one could scarcely regard it as anything but an "invention."¹³¹ Pufendorf's deliberate divergence from Grotian sociability to establish a commercially centred politic was, in fact, the real genesis of Four-stage historiography.¹³² Commerce was seen as the

¹²⁷ Dugald Stewart, 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.' *Adam Smith: Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, eds. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 293.

¹²⁸ Samuel Pufendorf, *On the Duty of Man and Citizen*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *The Divine Feudal Law: Or, Covenants with Mankind, Represented*, Theophilus Dorrington, trans., Simone Zurbruchen, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002); *Two Books of the Elements of Universal Jurisprudence*, trans. William Abbott Oldfather and Thomas Behme, ed. Thomas Behme (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009); *The history of popedom, containing the rise, progress, and decay thereof*. (London : Printed for Joseph Hindmarsh, Royal Exchange, 1691); *The Law of Nature and of Nation*. (London : printed for J. and J. Bonwicke, R. Ware, J. and P. Knapton, S. Birt, T. Longman [and others], 1749). Gershom Carmichael, *Natural Rights on the Threshold of the Scottish Enlightenment*, eds. James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002).

¹²⁹ Istvan Hont, "The Language of Sociability," in *Jealousy of Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 184.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 164.

¹³² Ibid., 169.

centripetal force of society and marketplaces the most public location for domestic trade.

Distancing himself from Grotius still further, Pufendorf founded his theory of commercial sociability on private property. Interestingly, and again, entirely unlike Grotius, Pufendorf inserted his newly adopted authority of subjective rights directly into the historical storyline of property law.¹³³ The task of justifying this argument for a subjective right to property would be carried out with the same careful analysis of history's movement toward "refinement and politeness" as helped support his original theory of commercial sociability.¹³⁴ Where Grotius had suggested social flourishing through "plainness" and "simplicity," Pufendorf introduced covetousness, ambition, and conflict. The Four-stage theory was an essentially commercial vehicle turning on axes of property and refined progress. Nevertheless, this was a story that could only be made coherent by the legitimacy of subjective rights to bring peace, particularly those rights regarding private property and labor. The theory of basic sociality incorporated into rights-based natural jurisprudence hinged upon fluctuating and yet paradoxically stabilizing forces of economic necessity and want. Prolonged social solidarity became based on refinement's ability to further expand the marketplace. Thus, the history of society is the story of its commercial progress from property possession to the development of "great cities" where "the dynamics of progress become irreversible."¹³⁵

The Scottish reception of Pufendorf's history of natural jurisprudence did not gain potency for several decades, however, until almost as a contagion the persuasive power of historical explanation came to its fullest life seemingly all at once in the thought of Hume, Robertson, Kames, and Smith. What interested these Scottish historians were history's causal connections to natural law and political society. They were concerned with the basic historical narrative of society and its institutions, but also with why society has an historical narrative in the first place and what kind of story history tells about it. Exploration of this deeper theme, the question of "why?",

¹³³ Pufendorf's, *On the Duty of Man and Citizen*. For a crucial essay challenging Richard Tuck on the idea of subjective rights in Grotius, and indeed the very idea of subjective rights, see Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Justice of Assignment and Subjective Rights in Grotius', *Bonds of Imperfection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 2004), 167-203. Greater attention to the political orientation of 'right' will be given in chapter four of this thesis.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 183. Pufendorf's treatment of 'great cities' is found in *Law of Nature*, 7.1.6.

was pioneered most persuasively by Hume, who having accepted Pufendorf's theory of property in principal, sought then to redeploy it as an historical hermeneutic more to his liking.

For Hume, metaphysics is powerless to provide the analytical tools for serious historical research because of its tenuously unreliable and indefinite subject matter. No, the task of the historian is to identify and explain *laws* that would ultimately establish a science of man transcending metaphysics.¹³⁶ History is partly, if not predominately, defined by the relative transitions in this science of man from its earliest savagery to its latest commercial refinement. If the individual is a progressive being, then society experiences progress *de facto*. But getting this conjectural history off the ground requires at least one crucial assumption. As Christopher Berry has identified, "if human behaviour across space and time can be compared, if gaps can be plugged by conjecturing what may have happened, if it is feasible to write a history of mankind then there has to be a basic *fixity* or *constancy* in human nature."¹³⁷ Natural law governs reality by imposing specific limits on what presently occurs and on what will possibly occur in the future. The same can even be said, on Hume's view, for the natural law's arbitration of intellectual faculties. Every human mind is and must be uniform, for "the faculties of mind are supposed to be naturally alike in every individual."¹³⁸ Law demands the same predictable uniformity from the human mind as it does of reality itself:

It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow from the same causes.¹³⁹

Most of what one might conclude about the people of modern France or England, suggests Hume confidently, could just as easily be concluded about the ancient Greek or Roman: "Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹³⁷ Christopher Berry, *The Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 68 (emphasis mine).

¹³⁸ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 80.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴⁰ Hume, *Enquiries*, 83.

Nevertheless, despite overwhelming immutability the static fixity of human nature does not on Hume's account preclude the possibility of long-term improvements. In addition to the Pufendorfian vision of commercial society historically conceived, an attitude of "optimism" had also pervaded the eighteenth-century consciousness. Leibniz' *Theodicy*, with its insistence that God could only have created the "best of all possible worlds," intending to justify theologically the occurrence of evil inadvertently induced (or at least encouraged) a spirit of rational optimism in early eighteenth-century political theorists.¹⁴¹ Shaftsbury and Pope are ideal examples in this regard; the latter going so far as to admit that in "spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite, one truth is clear, *whatever is, is Right*."¹⁴² To put the matter another way, readily adopted by eighteenth-century philosophers was the idea of intellect's immediate and untarnished interpretation of reality. Its tendency was to give itself over to additional optimisms. A perfectly created world governed by laws of a providential Deity meant that the mind's comprehension of reality was unlikely wrong and the authority of natural law unconditionally attributable to mind itself. It was this optimistic faith in the truthfulness of reality's presentation through the natural law and the certainty of mind to comprehend those presentations that invited an inherently progressive history of society. Strangely, however, the idea that God's best possible creation could somehow be improved over time apparently never struck the eighteenth-century mind as inconsistent. Part of what made this the best world was its openness to further improvement.

Hume's *History of England* was an attempt to reconstruct the facts of history to demonstrate just how far the English had truly advanced from its primitive, savage origins. Beginning with the ancient Roman settlements in Briton and concluding with the reign of William and Mary, Hume constructs what appears to be an historical outline framed by the cyclical loss and consecration of monarchs. Each volume, as it were, lifts the people of England onto higher planes and ushers them into grander vestibules. As he finally approaches the seventeenth-century and the conclusion of his historical journey, Hume highlights retrospectively the many sources of the kingdom's prosperity and pinpoints exactly where this prosperity was needlessly

¹⁴¹ On this point see Haydn Mason, 'Optimism, Progress, and Philosophical History,' in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought*, eds. M. Goldie and R. Wolker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195-217.

¹⁴² Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man* (Surrey: Aldershot/Scolar, 1988).

curtailed. When liberty is promoted in human affairs—whether in commerce, policy, or literature—and interference from the monarch avoided, citizens are most happy and moral.¹⁴³ This explains why Hume concludes his treatment of the late seventeenth-century monarchs with a summary of the period’s “manners, arts, and science.” When freedoms are allowed to run their course their natural effect is social improvement in every category. A conclusion slow in completion, he wishes to show how society is *improved* when afforded political freedoms. The liberalization of trade and printed word simply bring the historical story to its eighteenth-century climax. The six volumes of the *History* were intended to remind Britons of their long-term progressive trajectory evinced in specific commercial and literary freedoms. A sequence of English monarchs structures the timeline of Hume’s *History of England*, but this should not overshadow the real purpose of the regal line-up to demonstrate how monarchs infringe upon freedom and subsequently forced to resign themselves to a “mixed” form of government.

Elsewhere, in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” Hume identifies four principles of artistic and scientific advance.¹⁴⁴ First, arts and sciences arise only where society enjoys free government. To expect culture to blossom during the reign of an absolute monarch is “to expect a contradiction.”¹⁴⁵ Second, and rather straightforwardly, nothing proves more favourable to rapid and prolonged political advantage than trading with like nations. One might recall it is from this principle that “jealousy of trade” is later brandished to justify self-perpetuating refinements generated by consistent international trade. The third and fourth principles claim that arts and sciences are best cultivated under different types of government, and that when any state reaches perfection it must from that moment naturally (and necessarily) decline.¹⁴⁶ Thus articulated the implicit principles of Hume’s *History* become firmly explicit. Progress is secured and energized by a free government with mixed constitution that encourages commercial refinement. When

¹⁴³ “Governments too steady and uniform, as they are seldom free, so are they, in the judgment of some, attended with another sensible inconvenience: They abate the active powers of men; depress courage, invention, and genius; and produce an universal lethargy in the people.” (*History of England*, Vol. 6, lxxi).

¹⁴⁴ David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 111-137.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115, 117.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

one takes into account the totality of Hume's writings on the subject of trading liberties one is inclined to interpret his insistence on the radical superiority of free government as motivated by luxuries achieved in a free, unregulated commercial sphere; to be sure, he often seems to insist on free government for the *sake* of expanded freedoms in trade. But how then are we to respond to the last of Hume's principles: that when a state reaches perfection it must then begin to decline? One possibility might be to dismiss the principle as categorically impossible; a protective caveat to cover his flank from those mindful of ancient Rome. But Hume likely would have anticipated this objection, and in any event he appears actually to have in mind the rise and fall not of humanity in general, but of individual states. No state has ever reached constitutional perfection and there is no reason to believe one ever shall, but such challenges do not restrain human progress in arts and sciences over many centuries. "The arts and sciences, like some plants, require fresh soil," and so even where one society may wither and decay another springs to life from its fertilization.¹⁴⁷ Hume's account of England's journey from ancient Roman territory to seventeenth-century dynasty is an account of how, exactly, progress happens. The meaning of history is what humanity can become if it establishes institutions conducive to the political and commercial freedoms that promote luxury and refinement. He gives to us a story with several movements—from monarchical to mixed government, regulated trade to free trade, and even superstitious religion to natural religion—but regardless of which thematic variation one chooses the Humean plot remains the same—progress is an intrinsic good to civil society.¹⁴⁸ Passage of time gives everyone a greater reason to hope.

Lord Kames and William Robertson took a similar view. Robertson's *History of America* and *History of Scotland*, following closely in the footsteps of Hume, reconstruct the histories of America and Scotland with the same agonizing detail and conjectural aspirations. Rehearsing specific historical events should not confuse the fact, however, that all historical work, no matter how detailed, intends to make an argument; every historical event constitutes a premise reaching for a conclusion. For Robertson, each event and its unfolding consequences result from Divine providence

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴⁸ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (London: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1889). Polytheism gives way to a monotheism that will eventually give way to an even more "moderate" religiosity.

and thus cannot possibly be accidental. The Almighty executes his purposes through perfect laws and gradually affects the kinds of change that gradually improve human affairs. “Sacred history, by drawing aside that veil which covers the counsels of the Almighty, lays open his designs to the view of his creatures; and we can there trace the steps which he taketh towards accomplishing them with more certainty and greater pleasure.”¹⁴⁹ Historiography is the dominant mode of revelation. Equally telling is the selection of Colossians 1:26 for his sermon to the General Assembly—*Even the mystery, which hath been hid from ages and generations, but now is made manifest to his saints*. In his letter to the Colossians Paul declares that the gospel of Jesus Christ was, until his bodily appearance, a hidden mystery. Robertson’s reading of the text instead focuses on how society has progressed since the time of Christ and classifies several examples of contemporary superiority, including the abolition of slavery and establishment of just marital laws. He does not deny that Christ Jesus *is* the mystery St. Paul refers to in his letter to the Colossians; rather, his central point is that the revelation of Jesus Christ came at the most opportune time in history. The unfolding drama of God’s providence *since* that Revelation has taken the form of natural laws in the created order: “men came by degrees to understand this progressive plan of providence and to conceive how systems temporary and incomplete might serve to introduce that concluding and perfect revelation which would *declare the whole council of God to man*.”¹⁵⁰ History puts humanity in touch with conditions of ages past and thereby discloses gradual improvements to individuals and societies. “Mystery” has been revealed and *now* is the period of knowing. Importantly, our progress also includes “polished” morals to reinforce political institutions. By the hand of providence the present is made superior to the past and mankind fully comprehends this revealed fact since, as Robertson suggests, God has made His “whole council” known to him.

Lord Kames’ *Sketches of the History of Man*, on the other hand, is a much more explicit reconstruction of history’s progressive spirit. Kames felt that historiography had not gone quite far enough in its progressive reconstruction, as “there is still wanting a history of the species in its progress from the savage state to its highest

¹⁴⁹ William Robertson, “A Sermon upon the Situation of the World at the Time of Christ’s Appearance,” *History of America, Book X*. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996), 5-56.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 (Acts 20:27).

civilization and improvement.”¹⁵¹ Everything humans familiarize themselves with evinces marked progression. Manners, commerce, government, law, reason, morality, and even theology are all naturally improved over time by man’s increasing genius. God has endowed humanity with capacities for attaining higher and higher perfections with every passing age. When brought together, the several minor “sketches” of man’s historical development unite to form a much grander portrait wherein humanity is presented with the most elegant and colourful light. If the portrait of humanity was once a primitive charcoal sketch, it is surely now an ornate masterpiece! Kames’ *Sketches* is in this respect indicative of basic historical project of the Scottish school. No semblance of Ash Wednesday lingers—“from dust you came and to dust thou shalt return”—but only ambition, “from dust you came and higher glory shalt thou ever go!”

Of all the representatives of the Scottish school, however, it was Adam Smith that made greatest use of Pufendorf’s four-stage history. The four stages outlined in Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence*—Hunter, Shepherd, Agriculture, and Commerce—designate epochs, or constitutional transitions in the history of communities. His historical question concerns how contemporary society acquires a particular type of political order. Why, in other words, do we have *this* civil constitution rather than *that*? Smith’s theory first emerges from an inquiry into the origins of government, where he outlines several different types of government found in the annals of history. Society began as a collection of hunters with no conception of private property and no institutions on which to found a government. When it was recognized that objects, particularly livestock, could be possessed personally, this recognition initiated the first constitutional transition from Hunter to Shepherd. From the Shepherd stage emerged the first semblances of monarchy, as one individual by virtue of capacity or resource became naturally acknowledged to lead and govern. Separating the Shepherd from the Agricultural stage is the notion of possessing territorial lands, whereby a mere chieftain soon becomes a consecrated monarch. On this configuration land is no longer common but seized and divided into tracts. Society takes the form of extreme hierarchy, control of the dispossessed is maintained by those who possess and soil becomes the agricultural society’s most precious commodity. The age of Commerce that emerges from the decay of

¹⁵¹ Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, ed. James A. Harris (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), book 1.

Agriculture tends on Smith's account to begin with expanded domestic and international trade, but he had a difficult time explaining how, precisely, the transition from Agriculture to Commerce occurred as naturally as the previous two transitions. Unlike the first three stages, Commerce was not initiated by changing conceptions of property and Smith likely conceived of Commerce following from Agriculture in much the way Hont has suggested, "in a purely quantitative sense" only.¹⁵² Smith believed the Agricultural stage to be formally transcended. Interestingly, as was the case with Hume, this transition to Commerce would also naturally diminish the power of monarchical government and greatly strengthen republican sentiments. Even more interesting, though, is how the four-stage theory construes the establishment of constitutions. Smith's is a unique interpretation of history in that it gives *commerce* the power to break and refashion political structures. In the first two transitions this change is marked by revised conceptions of private property; in the latter two, labour is liberated from the necessity of the soil. Chieftain, monarch, and republic all emerge from revolutions in how basic commercial practices are understood within society. The power of commerce *precedes* the power of political institutions—commerce is conferred a dangerously totalizing force within Smith's theory when the strength behind what society has become expresses its most basic object of pursuit.

Central to Smith's account, as it was for Robertson and Kames, is the conviction that each transition into a new constitutional epoch symbolizes divinely executed positive improvement. In part six of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith claims:

This universal benevolence, how noble and generous soever, can be the source of no solid happiness to any man who is not thoroughly convinced that all the inhabitants of the universe, the meanest as well as the greatest, are under the immediate care and protection of that great, benevolent, and all-wise Being, who directs all the movements of nature; and who is determined, by his own unalterable perfections, to maintain in it, at all times, the greatest possible quantity of happiness.¹⁵³

God not only directs gradual improvements over time, but also determines by his own inalterable perfections to provide creatures with the greatest possible quantity of happiness. Our Maker's universal benevolence is thus simultaneously progressive and felicitous. His mission in the world is to amend abject circumstances and

¹⁵² Hont, *JT*, 160.

¹⁵³ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), VI.ii.3.1 (emphasis mine).

strengthen feeble sentiments for the sole purpose of creaturely progress and enjoyment. The historian's task is to uncover exactly how this providence matures humankind and contributes to the happiness of commercial society. For Smith and his peers the many advances in science, art, literature, manners, and especially commerce answered the question of *how* each contributes to the architecture of gladness God establishes for his creatures. Freedom to enjoy the happiness derived from these overarching provisions is all that is required; to allow the provisions to reach an appointed end.

Taking into account all four Scottish school historians, it would be useful to restate the general principles underlying the conjectural model before turning our attention directly to Ferguson's more unusual hermeneutic. Conjectural history is first and foremost a fact-driven model. The task is to reconstruct facts of history with such precision and unremitting detail that the narrative builds incrementally to an apex where readers can behold the glorious vistas of what has become of humankind. The depiction was inherently and unqualifiedly progressive. Natural law, the primary instrument of providence, could be discerned with immediate certainty and trusted to ensure uniformity in everyday affairs. Indeed, for Hume this uniformity would extend even to individual members of society determined by law to live predictably ordinary lives. Perhaps more dominant than any other principle of the conjectural model, however, was the power of commerce to unite, inspire, and direct civil society and its institutions. In this sphere the hand of providence was most easily detected. The Scottish school's wooden, quasi-static version of providence tended to identify God's purposes either with what humankind would like for God to accomplish or with what had transpired in past ages and was still sufficiently appreciated. It was, in other words, a selective providence twisted to serve humanity's moral improvement and maximal happiness. Nearly unanimous in their acknowledgement of basic human progress, the notion became enshrined as a guiding light to historical interpretation. Material history, those past happenings that comprise specific facts of history, informs immaterial history, the ideas and meanings surrounding past happenings. Prioritizing material to immaterial history in this way inevitably suppresses the meaning of history latent in material facts: what happened in the past and what one presently thinks about the event are wholly correspondent, uniting the material "then" with the material "now." The pre-eminence of material history, however paradoxical, inaugurated the idea of intrinsic progress in history. In the hands of the Scottish school the need for historical respect

was largely forgotten and then replaced by a story of relentless progress led chiefly by refinements in the commercial sphere.

Adam Ferguson on History

Among eighteenth-century Scottish historical treatises, Adam Ferguson's are doubtless among the unique and theoretically sophisticated.¹⁵⁴ Here we have a theorist steeped in the classics, trained theologically for the Kirk, who seems to prefer the ancient histories of moral and political thought to much of their contemporary commentary; a figure who tellingly conceives of philosophical inquiry as an *historical* investigation.¹⁵⁵ The first evidence of his historical perspective arises from a short pamphlet supporting stage-plays, and can be traced in greater maturity through his *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, and *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ferguson's mind is always historically directed but maintains an alternative notion of history to that of his Scottish peers. David Allen summarizes it well when he says, "the key appears to lie in Ferguson's preoccupation...with how the techniques required for studying past and present societies might be made to yield philosophical principles with far-reaching economic, political and ethical implications."¹⁵⁶

But what conceptual distinctions set Ferguson apart? In responding to this question it would be useful to take up the generic themes proposed at the outset—Metaphysics and Institutions—and consider how they were deployed to address historical questions. In doing so it will become clear that Ferguson was not only disparaging of conjectural models of history, but aimed even to purify the methods of historical inquiry themselves. Using a variety of different illustrations and metaphors, from biological life-cycles to the fall of the Roman Empire, Ferguson

¹⁵⁴ In making this claim I depart from those who include Ferguson in the Scottish conjectural school. See Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson*, (Berlin/New York: Springer, 2006).; H. M. Hopfl, "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring, 1978), 19-40; Christopher Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 70.

¹⁵⁵ Ferguson's library borrowing, for example, suggests a striking preference for classical literature over modern. See Jane Fagg, "Ferguson's Use of the Edinburgh Library: 1767-1806," in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 39-64.

¹⁵⁶ David Allen, "Ferguson and Scottish History," *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 36.

allows the ideas and events of history to retain their complex integrity, interpreting them cautiously in their proper context and without forcing them into progressive moulds. For him the circumstances from which ideas and events proceed are vital to how historical phenomena are correctly understood. The logical movement of history is neither conjectural nor cyclical, but a preliminary exploration of what can only be described as a primitive dialectic tool that, I argue, becomes a forerunner to an historical method later modified by Hegel and other German social theorists. In the course of our review of Ferguson's thought it will become increasingly evident that he takes his greatest departure from the conjectural school on the question of commerce. Conducting a history of commerce reveals that commercial force is only one of many powers forging constitutional changes in political society. The most decisive reason commerce cannot remain central to any version of progressive history, however, is because Divine providence, the true governing power of commerce, is neither unquestioning nor unselective. Providence makes *specific* provisions and is therefore misunderstood when construed as inherently progressive. Concepts of improvement and advancement are in themselves historically deficient and theologically vacuous. If God is ever concerned with improvement it is always first *redemptive*, for the idea of a God that improves without redeeming substitutes the God who rights wrongs for a god content to promote happiness or refine manners. To understand how Ferguson conceives of the historical relation between providence and commerce it is to the themes of Metaphysics and Institutions we should now turn.

Every philosophy of history implicitly or explicitly begins with the question of method. The first question of *what* history is quickly transforms into a question of *how* history is. Ferguson's historical methodology is exploratory and sound, conversing with different periods of history on their own terms. "The information they bring," he tells us, "is not like the light reflected in a mirror, which delineates the object which it originally came; but, like rays that come broken and dispersed...only give the colours and features of the body from which they were last reflected."¹⁵⁷ He is critical of those methodologies that appear to lean their conclusions too readily upon conjecture, and "to imagine that a mere negation of all our virtues is a sufficient description of man in his original state."¹⁵⁸ With statements

¹⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 76.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

like these Ferguson is aware both of how notions of a “state of nature” are arrived at, as well as how Whig history is summoned to support this species of political inquiry. His contemporaries tended to view the past with present standards, imposing modern ideals of “manners” and “polish” upon supposed “barbarous” and “savage” nations of antiquity. The present, however, is ill-qualified “to prognosticate effects” or to decide what should or should not have been the case in a past state of affairs. The present cannot discern with great specificity what the societies of the distant past were like and thus “we can neither safely take, nor pretend to give, information on the subject.”¹⁵⁹ We must insist upon a cautious reception. Comparing the present with the past qualitatively is not a valid form of moral and political inquiry and does a great disservice to history itself. Ferguson understood that moral and political philosophy were interdependent fields of thought and that to locate answers to moral and political questions one would be required to shift easily between the two spheres. Moreover, recognizing moral and political interdependency he also understood that these subjects were best understood when viewed historically. His methodology assumes that history is the place one goes for the wisdom to address compelling moral and political questions.

History remains an emphatically metaphysical subject in that it cannot reside exclusively in the present world but must also rely upon a variety of alternate powers for its continued existence. Memory, habit, communication, place, all cooperate to support the life of history. History becomes unintelligible when wholly naturalized because history cannot be explained in purely natural terms. Intrinsic to history is a peculiar transcendence. The material historian might find it an easy task to tell us where and when the Act of Union was signed into law, for example, but will find it woefully difficult to tell us *why* it was recommended or passed in the first place. History is as surprisingly elusive as it is decisive; which is another way of saying that it has both an abstract and concrete ontology. Ferguson perceived this tension and sought to reconcile the two polarities within a balanced historical inquiry, making each polarity central to the other for meaningful communication from past to present.

All history transpires in nature because mankind inhabits a natural world. What interests Ferguson, however, is how mankind *deals* with the world; not natural history *per se*, but mankind’s nature historically conceived. In both *Principles* and

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 76.

History, Ferguson rejects the popular notion of a supposed “state of nature” from which all humanity is a common descendant. He begins instead with the “order” of nature, which “consists of movements... [that] in a state of counteraction and apparent disturbance, mutually regulate and balance one another.”¹⁶⁰ Never static or entirely uniform, nature contains within itself a principle of continued movement controlled by its own inner forces—an original movement is counteracted and new movement begins afresh. Nature’s ordered unity allows for societies to form and flourish by affording enough consistency for them to generate elaborate histories of their own. Any such history will offer two types of narratives: a “history of species” and a “history of mind.”¹⁶¹ The former narrative will inform the historian of the effects of mind, whereas the latter will inform him of the operations of mind itself. So, to gain the truest vision of humanity one must avail oneself both to the study of mind, as well as to its “varieties presented in the history of mankind.”¹⁶² To know what we are like we must examine what we have been like.

Ferguson wants to understand the meaning of mind’s historical manifestations. Each such manifestation is unique and complex but never simply a consequence of human ingenuity. True ingenuity is due to the “wisdom of God,” he explains, “not the deliberate effect of invention or choice.”¹⁶³ One’s task is largely prescribed to them by their circumstance. Different places with different climates and different people means that each person must vary his pursuits to match the exigency of the case. “The inventions of one age prepare a new situation for the age that succeeds; and as the scene is ever changing, the actors proceed to change their pursuits... [according] to the circumstances in which they are placed.”¹⁶⁴ Man is meant to bend to reality, not reality to man, and thus reality’s dominance defines for each person and society the terms of fruitful participation. Because humankind is shaped by reality it is thereby empowered to help shape reality itself. If there is anything ingenious about a human accomplishment it comes purely as a gift of God’s benevolent wisdom. Nature and the human subject mutually accommodate one another according to the moving order established by Providence and its creative

¹⁶⁰ Ferguson, *Principles*, Vol. I, 18.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

genius. Behind every good and truthful manifestation of mind is the wisdom of God giving or allowing it expression. Indeed, on this point Ferguson would have warmly affirmed the condemnation of natural religion issued by Friedrich Schleiermacher at the turn of the century: “Suavity and sociability, art and science have so fully taken possession of...minds, that no room remains for the holy Being that lies beyond the world.”¹⁶⁵

Nature is life-cycle consisting in ordered movements. The many parts of life come together in an unexpected unity established paradoxically by virtue of life’s conflicting polarities: war and peace, freedom and determinacy, perfection and defect. What appears *prima facie* to be a profane conflict may regularly turn out to be the beginnings of peace; what was thought to be perfection was actually a defect; and so forth. Coherence is brought to these polarities by God’s providential order. His order is evidence of a design that must be revealed to humankind, wherein “man is finally let into the *secret* of his own destination and is enabled to become a conscious and willing *instrument* in the hand of his Maker for the completion of his work.”¹⁶⁶ If then one is made aware of their destination the task becomes one of discerning God’s eternal will. Sometimes God’s purposes are easily acted upon and sometimes they are not. This means the agent must consult the authority of history where the commands and wisdom of God consist in a living tradition. Sacred history discloses nature’s deepest truth: that life comes from death, and that death, in turn, summons all created life: “While the things that were are passing away, things that were not are brought into being.”¹⁶⁷ The moving life-cycle includes within itself the pinnacle of creation—humankind—whom God invites to look back upon the past from which it has come and glean the wisdom communicated.

This idea of “movement” and Ferguson’s not infrequent reference to “progress” or “progressive being” has persuaded many commentators to include him in the conjectural fold. Casting him in this way, isolating certain passages, fails to grasp the complexity of Ferguson’s historical imagination. It is true that he characterizes man as an active, even progressive being, but this is primarily because man cannot possibly be stationary or static. Matter can appear stationary, of course, but human

¹⁶⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, trans. J. Oman (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 1.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 166 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

being is always “progressing,” as it were, in a certain direction. Ferguson suggests, by and large, though everyone tends toward progression of some form or other, the content of their progression will differ according to the object pursued: “Progressive natures are subject to vicissitudes of advancement and decline, but are not stationary, perhaps, in any period of their existence.”¹⁶⁸ Human beings recognize within themselves a capacity for improvement motivated by a spirit of ambition to better themselves and their circumstance. At the same time Ferguson also argues that profiting from these ambitious powers obliges one “to recollect what they are, and to take resolution respecting their purpose.” His point, in short, is that progression should not be considered an open-ended horizon, but simply a natural process of human being directed toward a truthful end.

If it matters in what or how progress is made, or what kinds of progress are good or evil, then the *detection* of progress remains crucial for historiography. A striking difference arises between some particular innovation presenting itself and understanding the full significance or meaning of that innovation. The foremost difficulty is distinguishing a genuine innovation from false. Trajectories of persons or nations, for example, need time to develop and diffuse, and thus are often viewed in retrospect with many years separating the judge and the judged of. This distance results in a kind of intellectual humility, a patient suspension of judgement that permits the content of history to disclose itself on its own terms. There is no way of telling, really, in which general direction a person or society travels without some idea of their ultimate destination: “the sequel in the order of things is hid from our sight” and each is perfectly blind to future possibilities.¹⁶⁹ Speculating upon the future, particularly on the ultimate course of a given society, is like peering through the clouds and fog (James 4:13-17). On such evaluations science can teach us almost nothing, since there is little in “which the progress of mind is less questionable than it is in the attainment of science.”¹⁷⁰ Although the ultimate goal of science is to explain reality and investigate its operations, it frequently disappoints by “pushing forward too fast” in hasty pursuit of discovery. If unchecked this haste might also

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 190.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 315. Interestingly, the onus to decide and *act* in one direction or the other is summed up in Revelation 3:15,16: *I know all about you: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.* Only from the position of Christ can the direction one travels be viewed in its entirety.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 271.

define judgements on the moral trajectory of an individual or society. It is better, thinks Ferguson, to take the long view—to step back and define the wider contours of civil society’s topography.

Returning to the notion of life-cycle and nature’s movement through contrasting polarities, it is interesting that, of all things, Ferguson uses the development of memories and habits to transition from a mostly personal interrogation of progress, to a dynamically social one. Memories and habits are personal, yes, but they are also corporate, and each requires time to gain its communicative momentum. Ferguson narrows his attention to the impact of habits on political constitutions, and in particular their propensity for stimulating intellectual prejudices, since “the authority of government itself, under every political establishment, rests on the habits of thinking which prevail among the people.”¹⁷¹ He captures here an element of truth in popular sovereignty: sometimes habits are for the best politically and sometimes they are for the worst, but in either case habits remain essential to the enduring stability of civic order. Habit expresses itself politically through customs. As a history of action, habits serve as channels down which the current of human morality travels. Habits of thought and action determine together the directional character of civil society. Society utilizes habits to balance the life-cycle’s repetitive clash of polarities and drive them onward in one contiguous direction. Improvement is one natural end for society, decline the other. But it should be remembered that the question before us is metaphysical and asks specifically *why* progress or decline comes about when it does. What criteria are observed when making judgments of this kind? History is a narrative of past transactions, to be sure, but does it then follow that the plot of this narrative is contrived? Not obviously. A principle of progress in human nature might elicit one’s longing for improvement, but gratifying this desire is never guaranteed, and even if granted rarely takes an anticipated form. Thus, progress is an object of human longing that remains beyond human control. Here the metaphysical character of Ferguson’s historical thought becomes strikingly less opaque: “The material world was made,” suggests Ferguson, “not for itself, but for the mutual communication of minds and forming a system of signs and expressions in which the infinite author makes himself known to his intelligent creatures.”¹⁷² As a means of Divine

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 215.

¹⁷² *Principles*, 272.

communication, man's task is to participate with God in the world's redemption. Indeed, "the first object of concert or convention on the part of man is not to give society existence" or attempt novelty in a world already created, "but to perfect [the] society in which he finds himself already by nature placed."¹⁷³ Humanity is responsible for assisting God in his redemptive purposes without being motivated by reward, since "every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future."¹⁷⁴ Therefore, one may conclude that the best one can do is:

To view himself as but part in the community of living natures; by which he is in some measure let into the design of God, to combine all the parts together for the common benefit of all; and can state himself as a willing instrument for this purpose, in what depends on his own will; and as a conscious instrument, at the disposal of providence, in matters which are out of his power.¹⁷⁵

Having shown that the general direction of society cannot be known, much less shouted from the rooftops, Ferguson suggests that movements of society, like everyday movements of individuals, take one faint step at a time. The history of species is the story of society's advancement and decline, improvement and corruption; a history of mortals that takes the interest of historians only so far. The history of mind, on the other hand, allows for much more interesting metaphysical speculations. On this subject Ferguson distinguishes strictly between the material and the immaterial:

There are limits set to the progress of [man's] animal frame. It is stationary; it declines; and is dissolved: But to this progress of intelligence, in ascending the scale of knowledge and of wisdom, there are not any physical limits, short of the universe itself, which the happy mind aspires to know, and to the order of which he would conform his will.¹⁷⁶

In the section "Of the Future State" which concludes the first volume of the *Principles*, Ferguson argues further that although the material of humanity has an unthinkable future, "it is no violent stretch of imagination to conceive the human soul, in its present state, as the embryo of a celestial spirit."¹⁷⁷ Mankind is intended

¹⁷³ Ibid., 262.

¹⁷⁴ *Essay*, 119.

¹⁷⁵ *Principles*, 313.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 331.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 330.

to participate in God's redemptive purposes on earth so that it may participate eternally in His life after work on earth is done. The highest calling is to participate with Him so as to forever live in Him. Mind is that immaterial part of man that, after bodily death, becomes the everlasting company of God. Eternity unlocks mind's potential and renders it actual.

These broadly metaphysical concerns highlight Ferguson's objection to historiographies that presume to judge conclusively on the moral orientation and political trajectory of society. Methodologically this meant treating the subjects of historical inquiry with caution and dignity, allowing them to communicate their own questions from their own unique context. The present is not superior to the past by virtue of its convenient existence at a later time in history. Some conclusions can be drawn by observing the historical development of a given society, some cannot. What surely cannot be judged with sufficient accuracy is whether a people progress toward greater and greater refinements; whether, in other words, one society can ever be considered superior to another. Ferguson's argument has been that a society's true character is transcendent in that its moral direction can never be self-determined or self-assigned. Scientific discovery, despite its promises and noble aspirations, cannot reduce, test, dilute, or otherwise explain the problem away. No amount of observation or experimentation will abolish the transcendent beauty of the world. What often appears progressive—like the caterpillar's maturity to butterfly, or the merchant's continued acquisition of wealth—may prove in the end merely to have initiated the beginnings of ruin. If societies experience progress or decline it must be determined what kind of progress or decline is being experienced or sought. And in drawing this distinction, the distinction of kind, we approach the second theme of Ferguson's philosophy of history, Institutions.

Historically speaking, how do institutions form a narrative that clarifies the ambiguities of politics? Do institutions possess a greater descriptive power nature can only point toward indirectly? For Ferguson the answer to this latter question clearly is "yes" and the task of outlining this theme will be to respond to the question of why institutions receive and contribute unique historical meanings. Methods seeking only to describe persons, places, ideas, events, or institutions of history are bound to disappoint, as such descriptive efforts are usually as tedious as they are uninteresting. History is shaped by the ever-changing harmony of these forces, each striking its own note and inspiring the historian in a different way. Hume was correct

to suggest that history maintains certain seamless regularities and constancies but was wrong to insist that such fixity determines how history should be interpreted. The song that history sings may retain its basic form, indeed it must, but the many different sopranos, tenors, and basses uniting to vocalize the harmony of history's song are often wildly unpredictable. Without doubt the most moving moments of any a choral arrangement are those that fracture expectations! Meaning emerges from history as moments of surprise, spontaneity, or intense breakthrough. That Bach expresses a tendency to appreciate certain notes or harmonies and uses them with frequency is easily overshadowed by the dazzling originality of his artistic expressions. History, too, expresses certain uniformities, as Hume suggests, but its regularities and constancies become meaningful only when interrupted or transformed. Institutions serve as anchors of history in much the same way C-minor occupies Bach's Cantatas; the fixity of institutions provides a gravity regulating the unpredictable force of ideas and events. Institutions become, as it were, the historians starting point.

But what *is* an institution? Initially the term's use was theological and referred to a contiguous authority established by God to direct and order human affairs. Marriage, law, church, university, all represent institutions divinely imputed and governed. They are chiefly inherited, not assigned; their authority and continued legitimacy vouchsafed by God and assisted by public faith, habits, and prejudices. Human beings are born into particular places at particular times, and institutions provide the authoritative boundaries for human action in political life. Institutions are involuntary in the sense that they are not presented to the public as a collection of equal options from which to choose. And yet, for Ferguson, although a society's inherited institutions continually exert enormous force on social consciousness, each relies tenuously upon sustained public honouring of that force. In fact, authority of government itself "rests on the habits of thinking which prevail among the people."¹⁷⁸ The actual thinking of a people about their institutions contributes directly to the ever-fluctuating influence and durability of the institutions themselves. Questions of how institutions are experienced, therefore, logically precede their further formation *of* human experience.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 215.

Upon institutions “civilization” is founded.¹⁷⁹ For Scottish school historians this title of “civilization” was awarded, in addition to their own, only to the ancient Greek and Roman states. On their view these “masculine” yet vanquished republics represent the origin of a progress that European societies have since been avidly trying to replicate. Both Hume and Robertson began their histories of England and Scotland at their ancient roots. Ferguson, on the other hand, takes the question of institutional progression from a different angle and draws notably different conclusions. His moral and political thought remains institutionally, as opposed to socially or conventionally, centred because society and conventions revolve around institutions much like the planets do the sun, receiving energy from their furnishings and providing equilibrium to everyday life. In his *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, Ferguson illustrates how institutions are historically conceived. As the title indicates, the book narrates constitutional changes of ancient Rome from their republican beginnings to their despotic end. His method mimics in many ways the descriptive style of Robertson and Hume, but does so under radically different assumptions of what that history ultimately means. In his erudite article on political “threats” in Ferguson’s *Roman Republic*, Iain McDaniel explains that “Ferguson’s insistence upon the relevance of classical history for a proper understanding of modern Europe’s political trajectory sets him at some distance from other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers,” who “generally emphasized the superiority of modern commercial societies over their ancient more ‘barbarous’ predecessors.”¹⁸⁰ Roman history meant something to contemporary Europe because the story of Rome mapped nicely onto modern political affairs. The issues that either plagued or benefitted Rome seem also to plague or benefit societies many centuries removed, suggesting many moral and political questions always remain perennial. Montesquieu had made a similar claim only a few decades prior and it is from him Ferguson inherits the interpretation of Roman decline as a consequence of “corrupted public spirit” attending constitutional transitions toward democratic sovereignty.¹⁸¹ Disagreement between the two theorists is visible too, of course, but

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 252.

¹⁸⁰ Iain McDaniel, “Ferguson, Roman History and the Threat of Military Government in Modern Europe,” in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 116.

¹⁸¹ Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, David Lowenthal, trans. (New York: Free Press, 1965). Ferguson’s reading of Montesquieu, as will be seen more clearly later, is most pronounced in latter sections of his *Essay*.

what is essential for our purposes is what Ferguson's understanding of ancient Roman institutions tells us about his philosophy of history. The point seems to be that "progresses" assigned to civilizations of modern Europe could also be assigned to ancient Rome. Rome is not merely a society from which modern society has arisen and upon which it frowns; rather, it is a society with abundant political analogues that would, if consulted, impart wisdom to cope with corresponding questions. In Rome's case the active pursuit of greater territories and pleasures slowly destabilized institutions preserving social cohesion and anesthetized public spirit. But Ferguson nowhere argues that these corruptions ultimately converted Rome from a republican to monarchical constitution. The problem was more complex than that. Instead his argument is that modern European nations, like ancient Rome, are susceptible to capricious swings between popular and monarchical tyranny. The *real* political problem is anarchy. Ancient Rome had lost the power of its institutions because their authority was undermined, becoming

by degrees, and at every succession, more and more mercenary or venal in the choice of their masters, more brutal in the exercise of their force against fellow-subjects, and, with a continual degradation from bad to worse, substituted order, courage, and discipline of Roman legions, [for] mere ferocity, with a disposition to mutiny as well as rapine.¹⁸²

The empire appeared healthy at its outer extremities while secretly rotting in its centre. It underwent two ideological transitions, one moral and one political: from republic to monarchy, and from Epicurean to Stoic convictions. We are concerned here only with the latter transition, from Epicurean to Stoic. When there were rights to preserve and public duties to perform the Roman people were persuaded to align themselves with Epicurus and establish pleasure as the highest standard of good and evil. But when public occupations were taken from them and their personal safety jeopardized they quickly returned to the idea that "men were made happy by the qualities which they themselves possessed, and by the good they performed, not by mere gifts of fortune."¹⁸³ Romans turned their hearts from Epicurus to Zeno for consolation. In this way, therefore, philosophical ideas—their usual commitments included—are seen to emanate from political circumstances, not vice-versa. Political and moral convictions were deeply intertwined: the empire grew, commerce

¹⁸² Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute: 1825), 391.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 394.

flourished, and the land was cultivated, “but these were but poor compensations for the want of that rigor, elevation, and freedom of mind, which perished with the Roman republic itself, or with the political character of the other nations which had been absorbed in the depths of this ruinous abyss.”¹⁸⁴ Institutions had endured gradual, almost imperceptible deterioration at the hand of the very people these institutions supported, and thus ancient Rome collapsed under the weight of its own corruption.

The story of ancient Rome illustrates how and why institutions are initiated, changed, protected, or abolished. Every new variation is a budding flower ripe with meaning. Ferguson’s investigation of the “Savage” and “Barbarian,” the historic creatures so disparaged by Scottish school historians, reinforces this point. In early sections of the *Essay*, Ferguson isolates the question of what man is capable of actively carrying out. What can man’s exertive actions actually accomplish? Scientific experimentation, it is clear, will teach us nothing new on the subject.¹⁸⁵ The better option is to “take the history of active being from his conduct in the situation to which he is formed, not from his appearance in any forced or uncommon condition.”¹⁸⁶ The Savage or Barbarian, for example, should be treated contextually as a product of their placement. Notions of a progress from animal to citizen are nothing but presumptuous fantasies and inventions. If it is admitted that man possesses a principle of improvement, then that improvement has only to do with what he is capable of achieving, and nothing more. All the latest efforts at newness and advantage are but a continuation of past endeavours and whether or not one naturally advances toward or retreats from noticeable improvement remains mostly concealed. Determining what is truly “natural” about progress always proves treacherous because of the term’s unavoidable ambiguity, and because “the actions of men are equally the result of their natures.”¹⁸⁷ The Savage in Ferguson’s *Essay* is represented by the Indian tribes of North America. On his account, the Savage pays

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 396.

¹⁸⁵ “A scientific thought is universal only in the sense that it is universally applicable to a limited sphere; it is empirically universal, not absolutely universal; it applies to all the facts that make up the field of an inquiry, but not to all facts whatever, on the contrary, were it applicable to all facts, it would cease to be a scientific law and would become a philosophical” (Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 335).

¹⁸⁶ Ferguson, *Essay*, 9.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

little attention to property, lives mostly for subsistence, views his place pragmatically, and lives a life of equality with peers. There exists little sign of subordination and each member is content to live according to the natural furnishings of nature. For Savages, “power is no more than the natural ascendancy of mind; the discharge of office no more than a natural exercise of the personal character, and while the community acts with an appearance of order, there is no sense of disparity in the breast of any of its members.”¹⁸⁸ The bonds that bring Savages together are those of genuine affection and friendship. Property is unthought-of because it is not yet viewed as a requirement for life. “No man is naturally indebted to another” and therefore the community is free of unequal treatment. It is only when friendship becomes defined in terms of duties or favours that the bonds of friendship are corroded, as the importation of obligations into the frame of relations eliminates its friendliness. The presumption of equality is abolished by a sense of indebtedness giving one member of the community leverage over another. Trust is lost; suspicion prevails. But the Savage avoids this problem by seeing justice as a matter of fitness, “not the distinctions of equipage and fortune.”¹⁸⁹ To illustrate this conceptual difference: “in Europe to fall in battle is accounted an honour; among the [Savages] it is reckoned disgraceful.”¹⁹⁰ They are a capable people without ambition. Ferguson is persuaded that once the Savage has taken note of the negative effects commercial arts admit, he loses the freedom that only his native culture naturally endows—“however tempted to mix with polished nations, and to better his fortune, the first moment of liberty brings him back to the woods again; he droops and he pines in the streets of the populous city.”¹⁹¹ Commercial gain is for the Savage a small temptation, but one quick to atrophy with the deadening of competitive energy.

What differentiates the Savage from the Barbarian is the latter’s recognition that property can be privately possessed. For the Barbarian, the “common” is already a *divided* common.¹⁹² A specific application of labour to a specific place “aims at an exclusive possession” and “when the individual no longer finds among his associates

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁹² On this point Ferguson clearly departs from Locke (see chapter 1).

the same inclination to commit every subject to public use, he is seized for his personal fortune; and is alarmed by the cares which every person entertains for himself.”¹⁹³ Thus it is only when others are seen to be withholding from the public and hoarding out of fear of not-having that one seeks to acquire what best supports subsistence. Herds are the initial source of the Barbarian’s wealth. Each occupies himself with his own doings, his own accumulation and his own advantage. And yet, explains Ferguson, one “may now apprehend that the individual having now found a separate interest, the bands of society must become less firm, and domestic disorders more frequent.”¹⁹⁴ Unequal distribution of property introduces a permanent subordination resulting in total abolition of equality. Property first initiates and then encourages competition, strife, and violent conflict. Unity is forged anew only by dedication to a leader recognized for their amassed fortunes. Thus, in the society of Barbarians, fortune replaces capacity, generosity, and friendship: “every nation is a band of robbers, who prey without restraint, or remorse, on their neighbours.”¹⁹⁵

Ferguson agrees with Scottish peers that recognition of a “fortunate” leader is the beginning of monarchical government, but disagrees with where this logic leads historical thinking. When the Chieftain or King becomes “the object of veneration” he also becomes the highest object of national unity, their “common bond of connection.”¹⁹⁶ Upon coronation the monarch seeks to expand his dominion by conquest, which serves to further unite the nation against a common enemy and doubly reinforce allegiance to the king. The Barbarian is reduced to a useful subject, for “when interest prevails in every breast, the sovereign and his party cannot escape the infection...to turn people into property, and to command their possessions for his profit or his pleasure.”¹⁹⁷ This is what happens, thinks Ferguson, when interest rather than laws guides a sovereign and his people; the logic of acquisition halts not even at the profane possession of people. Mankind is everywhere divided and interest drives the wedge still deeper.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 99. It is worth noting at this juncture the similarity between the language used here by Ferguson to refer to the ‘bonds’ of union in societies and the political language of Augustine in *City of God*. The correspondence is not likely accidental.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 101.

Stepping back from our direct investigation of the Savage and Barbarian what, exactly, is their practical role in Ferguson's philosophy of history? As with the narrative of the Roman Empire, it seems that the Savage and Barbarian illustrate the incoherence of reading progress into the institutional plot of history. The supposed "rude" nations of the past (a term Ferguson identifies with "disorder") are *not* to be considered as inferior to our own:

We are generally at a loss to conceive how mankind can subsist under customs and manners extremely different from our own; and we are apt to exaggerate the misery of barbarous times by an imagination of what we ourselves should suffer in a situation to which we are not accustomed. But every age hath its consolations, as well as its sufferings.¹⁹⁸

Projecting oneself and one's circumstance onto history is a tempting fallacy for even the most cautious historian, but history must not be considered as an account of how institutions of the present came to ascendancy over institutions of the past. As is illustrated by the rise and fall of the Roman Empire and the basic political configuration of Savage and Barbarian societies, institutions, like the people they govern, are susceptible to transforming movements. Rome seemed to be progressing just fine until it unexpectedly collapsed; the Savage seemed (by Hume and Robertson, anyway) to show signs of rudeness and depravity when in fact he was happily content with primitive subsistence. On both accounts Ferguson shows that institutions are not self-directed toward political perfection. Any discernible difference between the ancient and modern—between "rude" and "polished"—is purely a difference of kind and not of worth. Ferguson's treatment of the Roman and Savage demonstrates that institutional changes prompted by commercial forces within these rude societies, though such forces may appear to modern eyes intrinsically conducive to political improvement, were for these societies corrosive to the affective powers that held them together. There is little reason to view the ancients as less polished or civilized: "they have merited and obtained our praise" by "their penetration, the ability of their conduct, and the force of their spirit."¹⁹⁹

A natural law of progress cannot long exist because, as Prof. Collingwood has nicely put it, the idea of a law of progress, "by which the course of history is so governed that successive forms of human activity exhibit each an improvement on

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 103 (emphasis mine).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 189.

the last, is...a mere *confusion of thought*, bred of an unnatural union between man's belief in his own superiority to nature and his belief that his is nothing more than a part of nature."²⁰⁰ Similarly persuaded, Ferguson suggests societies are largely a product of their place and circumstance, and any advancement or improvement considered only *in kind*. Commerce is conspicuously referred to as a category of "art," prescribed to humanity by its place, controlling to some degree what can or cannot be contributed. In a period of conflict the energy of arts will be comparatively low as national felicity is doused by the burden of war. The artistic is latent in every human soul and only requires favourable circumstances to draw it into the open. Modern Europe is artistically indebted to the ancients only to a small degree, since they provided merely the "materials" and "form" of artistry and not the felicitous motivation. Arts arise spontaneously from the human mind wherever men are cheerfully placed. And yet, in a statement strangely resonant with Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," "it is difficult to find the origin of any art."²⁰¹ The steps toward perfect art are numerous and "we are at a loss on whom to bestow the greatest praise; on the first or on the last who may have born a part in the progress."²⁰² Commercial arts, a specific category of artistic activity, arise from affections and, like literary arts, are "promoted by circumstances that suffer the mind to enjoy itself."²⁰³ Not wholly inherited from the past and containing in itself a certain newness, art makes fresh impressions upon the fabric of reality and upon the texture of commercial enterprise in particular. The question is whether this newness or fresh impression constitutes a genuine *improvement*: does the process of the old giving way to new imply superiority? From whose point of view could such a judgment be determined? Here again Collingwood offers insight. The problem with latent progress is that experience shows us that the new generation has a difficult time entering sympathetically into the life of the old; the new generation "sees life as a mere incomprehensible spectacle, and seems driven to escape from sympathy...by a kind of instinctive effort to free itself from parental influences and bring about the

²⁰⁰ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 323.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p.163. See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 139-204. "*The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people's historical existence—is art.*"

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., 165.

change on which it is blindly resolved.”²⁰⁴ It is precisely because of this inability to sympathize that

the historical changes in a society’s way of life are very rarely conceived as progressive even by the generation that makes them. It makes them in obedience to a blind impulse to destroy what it does not comprehend, as bad, and substitute something else as good. But progress is not the replacement of bad by the good, but of the good by the *better*.²⁰⁵

Art *develops* but cannot be said to progress. And as commercial arts cooperate with institutions it becomes clear, on Ferguson’s account, that art leaves an historical impression on institutions which might not turn out to be an improvement. Political institutions are initiated and concluded, contracted and expanded, altered and preserved; they are both a product of, and force upon, civil society. Against the Scottish school therefore Ferguson insists commerce does not always administer improvements but may degenerate and corrupt even the most cultivated bonds of cohesion.

The two generic themes we have considered in Ferguson’s historical thought—Metaphysics and Institutions—appear on closer examination to take on a sharply *dialectical* character. History widens prudence by stretching and informing it of customs and conventions corresponding to present reality. Ferguson’s historical writing, as David Kettler explains, “embodies a method, but does not pronounce on method,” allowing him to “hold alternative possibilities in suspension, while moving to a conclusion and achieving an effect at a level different from that upon which the possibilities clash.”²⁰⁶ Hume, of course, is known to have disliked the *Essay* enough to discourage Ferguson from going ahead with publication, and although Hume’s letters on the subject are unclear as to why, the tone with which his disagreement is expressed draws further contrast between the preferred methods of each historian. And as Italian historian Vincenzo Merolle urges, “Hume is a man of the Enlightenment, Ferguson a precursor of Historicism and Romanticism.”²⁰⁷ The ideas and method of the *Essay* belong more to the nineteenth than to the eighteenth-

²⁰⁴ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 326.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. Collingwood is not advocating progress, of course, but rather outlining its logical contours.

²⁰⁶ David Kettler, “History and Theory in Ferguson’s ‘Essay on the History of Civil Society’: A Reconsideration,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Nov., 1977), 437-460.

²⁰⁷ Vincenzo Merolle, “Hume as a Critic of Ferguson’s *Essay*,” *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 73-87.

century. Ferguson could identify the faulty logic of historical progress while simultaneously acknowledging the historical fact that life changes—his method allows for this tension. A primitive brand of historicism was introduced that even his contemporaries could identify as original. The “secret substratum of the *Essay* was not the philosophy of the Enlightenment but a philosophy that sought...to comprehend theory as a historical practice—historicism.”²⁰⁸

This, in essence, explains Ferguson’s taking an historical view of morality and politics and why his philosophy of history appears proto-Hegelian. Ferguson’s position toward history manifests itself throughout the corpus of his work—moral and political philosophy are *historical* explorations. In the *Principles*, but even more explicitly in the *Essay*, he employs an unrefined dialectical method that hangs together precisely as Kettler has suggested, in suspension. Affirmation is often followed by denial; freedom is pitted against determinacy; life gives itself to death and death gives itself to life. History progresses and declines and its dialectic movement gathers still greater exploratory momentum through successive human experiences. The rough-edged historicism and primitive dialectic in Ferguson’s thought is also confirmed by the German reception of his historical works in the late eighteenth-century.²⁰⁹ It is difficult to say with any exactness what Hegel himself thought of Ferguson’s historical method, but clearly “Ferguson’s complex view of history, allowing patterns of progress and regress and tying them to deliberate human actions, fascinated and baffled” his German counterparts.²¹⁰ The best we can do is infer from a comparison of Ferguson and Hegel’s historical methods notable similarities suggesting a common historical outlook. Disincluded from the list of similarities, obviously, is the idea of historical progress; a view Hegel endorses with confidence and one Ferguson largely rejects.

Describing Ferguson’s historical method as dialectical returns us to the analogy of the life-cycle referred to above. Conjectural history is expressly premised on the idea that history naturally progresses. Its unspoken premise, however, is the idea that *nature itself* progresses. This latter premise was made possible by conceptual

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 84. Merolle refers here to Baron D’Holbach.

²⁰⁹ Two of the better texts exploring this link are Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), and Norbert Waszek, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel’s Account of ‘Civil Society’* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988).

²¹⁰ Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment*, 316.

transitions several decades earlier when matter, the stuff of the universe, became “the quantitatively organized totality of moving things.”²¹¹ For the ancient Greeks, on the other hand, there was no “dead” matter: “nature was a vast living organism, consisting of a material body spread out in space and permeated by movements in time; the whole body was endowed with life, so that all its movements were vital movements; and all these movements were purposive, directed by intellect.”²¹² Unlike the ancients, late renaissance theorists perceived reality as a multiplicity of united objects absent of imposed form. Mind and the material world were fused. Ferguson is clearly most sympathetic with the ancient view of nature.²¹³ In a short section of the *Principles* (“The Origin of Evil”) he claims “the whole is alive and in action; the scene perpetually changing, but in its changes exhibits an order more striking than could be made to arise from the mere position or description of any form entirely at rest.” In reality, explains Ferguson, “the principles of agitation and of life combine their effects in constituting an order of things, which is at once *fleeting and permanent*.”²¹⁴ Thus, not only is the “whole *alive and in action*,” but the movement of this life takes a dialectical shape. “While the things that were are passing away, things that were not are brought into being.”²¹⁵

Ferguson modifies this classical understanding of nature by infusing it with Providence. The natural world is God’s creation, and like the artist who gives every effort to preserve his masterpiece, so too does God concern himself with the care of

²¹¹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), 112.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹³ Others have agreed. The German historian, Reinhart Koselleck, has suggested that the concept of progress is itself modern in origin and could not have emerged prior to the eighteenth-century, giving shape to the re-conceptualization of history into a justification of the future. He thinks “it may be indisputably presupposed that progress is a concept specifically calibrated to cope with modern experiences, namely that traditional experiences are surpassed by new ones with astonishing speed.” This acceleration of human experience at the hands of progress has forced three uniquely modern steps: universalization of progress’ subject (applying to all spheres), embodiment of progress as an historical agent, and consecration of progress as its own subject. In contrast to progress, any “decay” wrought by this misstep is simply incorporated back into the progressive process as natural fertilizer to its continued growth. And yet, “precisely because and so long as progress is unfinished, the chances of decay increase—admittedly, no longer read in natural metaphors but rather in the sense of catastrophes that human beings have become capable of bringing about for themselves with the technological powers at their disposal.” Progress thus makes plans while at the same time redefining the goals these plans shoot for. Moderns strive for a progressive horizon that is actually an abyss. See “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline’”, in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, Todd Presner trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 224.

²¹⁴ Ferguson, *Principles*, Vol. I, 174 (emphasis mine).

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

his good world. It is indeed a natural world enlivened by the immanent Spirit “consisting” in Christ (Col. 1:17). The life-cycle of nature reflects the *telos* of divine wisdom in its paradoxical character: material and immaterial, describable and indescribable, fleeting and permanent. Life-cycle as a natural revelation of God imitates the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection restores the created order and reconciles all life from estrangement. But the transformation of creation that follows from the resurrection of Christ does not emanate a progressive hue; “redemption” conveys a meaning that deliberately avoids the ambitions of progress. His world was created good (Gen.1) and does not need to be improved upon, only ordered.²¹⁶ Progress is for Ferguson a theological mistake and a historical fallacy. Semblances of improvement making appearance in history—perceived in the only way improvements or declines can be perceived, retrospectively—are the direct result of Christianity’s inexhaustible competence for transforming human existence. Transformations are often interpreted as improvements, and indeed this is not to a fault, since many important historical moments disclose obvious progresses; the trouble, however, is that what may seem an example of progress from one point of view may well appear an odious corruption from another.²¹⁷ Progresses, if they occur at all, enjoy only a minor niche of human experience and invariably suffer a very short life. Confusion sets in when a “change” observed in history is categorized positively or negatively according to unknown evaluative criteria of a judging historian. Prescriptions of what should or should not have been the case will therefore dismember any history it holds in view. More important than the historical change itself, at any rate, is the inner meaning partially hidden from scrutiny. *Meaning*, not fact, is the crux of historical knowledge. Whether persons or societies progress to superior states of being is less important historically than seeking to recover the significance of historical phenomenon by asking what was actually accomplished. Meaning emerges from eruptive newness in history. “To be truly ‘history’,” as Oliver O’Donovan has put it, “history must be shaped by the unique, by that which cannot be guessed from the

²¹⁶ For more on the logic of providence that emerges from the resurrection see Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986).

²¹⁷ “The attempt to know what we have not means of knowing is an infallible way to generate illusions; and this attempt to judge whether one period of history or phase of human life, taken as a whole, shows progress as compared with its predecessor, generates illusions of an easily recognizable type.” (Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p.327)

scrutiny of the natural.”²¹⁸ When the artist completes his masterpiece on canvas he revisits it only with the most slight and meticulous strokes.

Perhaps the most questionable consequence of the conjectural model in the modern age is its packaging of progress into economic theory. The totalizing intensity with which the economy demands our constant attention tends also to blind us to the fact that nearly all capitalist models have built within them variables of progress. The market must grow, consumption must increase, and ever more capital generated. Unrelenting in its aims the progressive market is incapable of yielding to its own demands; its thirst is unquenchable. Christian virtues of contentment, satisfaction, peace, and generosity are forced into exile. This is not to say, of course, that capitalism would self-destruct if guided by such virtues; it may well be strengthened. The point, rather, is that under present conditions the progressive energy of capitalism discourages (or disallows) these Christian virtues. Liberal free market capitalism promises limitless horizons for limitless human ambitions and we have arrived at this position, however indirectly, precisely because progress came to describe what happens necessarily to the world over time.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to contrast the historical thought of Adam Ferguson with his Scottish contemporaries so as to expose tensions inherent to conjectural models of history. We began outlining the shape of the conjectural position by describing its motivations, method, and end. This was followed by an extended conversation with Ferguson on the disclosure of meaning in history. The conversation was guided by two generic themes: Metaphysics and Institutions. From the former emerged questions of nature, determinacy and freedom, novelty, complexity, epistemic humility, and Providence. Metaphysics came at the meaning of history from the abstract angle. The latter theme, Institutions, came at the meaning of history from the concrete angle, which explored the nature of institutional shift historically (ancient Rome) and comparatively (Savage). From this treatment emerged a primitive version of a dialectical method. But it was a dialectical method

²¹⁸ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 83.

with historicist commitments, as it is clear Ferguson wished to investigate moral and political questions as historical phenomena.

History is a search for meaning, and meaning endeavours to express itself uniquely in history. For Ferguson history is not a story of progress—history is a sage. Through its lens one traces the moral and political contours of human existence. History resists rigid determinacy and is absorbed into Providence that preserves history by infusing it with meaning. Commercial progress may improve certain political institutions or it may ruin them, one can never be certain. Civilizations rise and fall, institutions endure and crumble, societies unite and dissolve. What is to come of any given society cannot be determined absolutely and for this reason Ferguson recommends a posture of humility. People of one age cannot with any degree of accuracy claim superiority to another when comprehensive evaluative criteria remain unavailable. Bound up in the wisdom of God history is, in truth, the story of his goodness; a symphony of which he is the author, conductor, and audience: History bespeaks him as he reveals its meaning.

Chapter 3

Action

Historians familiar with eighteenth-century moral and political thought might balk at the proposal of treating action as an exceptional philosophic category. The eighteenth-century, they will say, is the age of natural reason, Greek virtue, and Roman politics; the age of moral sense, sentiment, sympathy, fellow-feeling, and natural reason. If the period erects any ideological pillars, action is not like to be one of them. For most eighteenth-century philosophers, action is at best a tertiary concern. One acts in the way one is conditioned or determined to act. Studying the act itself can illuminate little of moral or political significance. This tendency toward evaluation of pre-action conditions is perhaps the most dominant motif of eighteenth-century moral philosophy and it is precisely in light of this motif and philosopher's determination to marginalize the role of action in moral and political theory that Ferguson's thought becomes all the more unique. Unlike his Scottish contemporaries Ferguson positions action squarely in the center of his philosophical investigations. He is concerned with practical questions his contemporaries either wholly neglect or purposefully marginalize. Action is not merely a by-product of other more important ethical matters, but a moral and political gateway through which all practical investigations must pass.

Unique he may be, systematic he most certainly is not. Ferguson's is a conceptually cautious and historically balanced action theory of subtle originality, charily weaving together disparate threads of classical insight and Christian metaphysical reflection. We saw in the previous chapter that "active being" occupied a prominent, if not central position in Ferguson's philosophy of history: action is understood historically and history is largely understood as a narrative of actions. To better define the texture of action in Ferguson's thought, this essay will begin by reviewing several of Ferguson's peers—Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith—and outlining briefly their rationale for centralizing virtue in civil society, taking particular note of how action became largely neglected in moral inquiries of the period. Each of these theorists view action as an inessential part of moral philosophy

and in the final estimate it will be crucial to see why this was in fact the case. With these contextual observations in place we will make our first attempt at sketching Ferguson's own action theory with greater specificity, focusing narrowly on five distinct but interrelated conceptual themes: history, human nature, reason, virtue, and futurity. Framing the sketch within these thematic parameters will aid in further illustrating Ferguson's distinctiveness as a thinker and accentuate the Christian character of his action theory. At the conclusion of this rehearsal it will be essential to put some conceptual distance between Ferguson and the Roman Stoicism to which he has been linked by modern commentators; neither going so far as to suggest avoidance of Stoic tendencies altogether, nor leaving him relegated to Stoic fates. Final points of this chapter will then be devoted to highlighting the import Ferguson's existential understanding of action has for commerce and for the types of exertions called for commercially in political life. If action could be said to have an essence, does that essence reflect certain Christian commitments? If so, how do those commitments produce a moral shape in the commercial sphere?

Interlocutors: Scottish Contemporaries and Ancient Stoicism

Eighteenth-century philosophy, on the whole, has comparatively little to say about the nature or anatomy of action and incomparably more to say about the nature of virtue. Not dissimilar to previous ages for which virtue takes conceptual priority, moral inquiry in the eighteenth-century tends to by-pass transformative action altogether by focusing on what lies hidden behind actions in the form of passions or dispositions. Scottish moralists of this period were of no exception and were perhaps even *more* inclined to privilege virtue to exertive action in moral casuistry. Before proceeding to a reconstruction and interpretation of Ferguson's theory of action, therefore, it would be useful first to capture a vision of how several Scottish peers—in this case Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith—understood the virtue-action interface.

The philosophic efforts of Francis Hutcheson could be viewed as a preliminary attempt to break apart and differentiate the dispositional strata that uphold impassioned virtue. Questions relating to the appropriate execution or intended goals of action are no longer relevant or interesting. His attention is narrowed to the discrete origins of action where passions offer singular guidance to particular moral judgments. Persuaded by ancient appraisals of human passion, Hutcheson exposes

human nature at its core first by grounding action in affections and then by grounding affections in human nature. The main strategy of his *Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* shows that the source for comprehending virtue is human nature's *moral sense*—"that faculty by which we perceive virtue and vice, and approve or disapprove of them in others."²¹⁹ This sense of virtue or vice is itself reducible to "one general foundation; the manner [of] computing the morality of Actions."²²⁰ By making Moral Sense the basic origin of action and diverting the focus of moral inquiry to the questions of why and how the Moral Sense operates, Hutcheson enshrines a cognitive function that serves as both the executor *and* object of moral evaluation. The pursuit of moral learning becomes a retreat into the mind's Moral Sense and the task of moral deliberation becomes a matter of describing dispositional attitudes. Contingent mental content temporarily controlling the Moral Sense is of greatest ethical significance. The "intention of moral philosophy," he claims, is "to direct me to that course of action which tends most effectually to promote [my] greatest happiness and perfection; as far as it can be done by observations and conclusions discoverable from the constitution of nature, without any aids of supernatural revelation."²²¹ Moral inquiry therefore addresses the fluctuating properties of an otherwise constant Moral Sense. Nevertheless, the true and happy end of humankind "cannot be distinctly known without previous knowledge of the constitution of the species," which we are told later is simply "to inquire into the several powers and dispositions of the species."²²² Strangely, this investigation into (historically) "previous" dispositions is never conducted. Hutcheson instead attempts to translate historically sensitive moral concepts into terms suitable for the ever-widening field of contemporary "pneumatics."²²³ The important task, he thinks, is to describe the mental faculty of moral sense and why that faculty approves or disapproves of certain actions. Such approbation, in the end, is all that matters in morality: "there is therefore...a *natural* and *immediate* determination to approve certain affections, and actions consequent upon them; or

²¹⁹ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004) treatise II, section 1.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, treatise II, section 3.

²²¹ Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006).

²²² *Ibid.*, book I, chapter 1.

²²³ It is perhaps no small irony that "Pneumatics," or study of the Spirit of Mind, is in eighteenth-century Scottish literature wholly unaccepting of "supernatural aids".

natural sense of immediate excellence in them, *not referred to any other quality perceivable by our senses or by reasoning*.²²⁴ Thus, with the language of “approval” one recognizes necessary functions of a learned and immediate “determination” (judgment) operating unfettered from reasoning, law, truth, or history.²²⁵ This cluster of instincts (senses) and judgments known as human nature are considered absolutely trustworthy and universally benevolent, cooperating “beautifully” to maximize personal and corporate happiness.²²⁶ It is simply a credit to the Author of nature that benevolence happens to be that affection which most directly leads to human happiness.

David Hume, on the other hand, though certainly partial to a “pneumatic” method, attempts to get behind even the moral sense itself by explaining what it is and to what it is not ultimately beholden. Moral philosophy interrogates the collection of perceptions causally linked to feelings of pleasure and pain. Like Hutcheson, Hume also detaches the virtuousness of an action from its reasonableness. On his account, the problem is “whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction.”²²⁷ Morals are transformed from objective authorities to special intellectual powers, since reason lacks the causal capacity to initiate an action from its own resources and must instead rely upon the forces of passion and perception to accomplish its ends. Hume’s more extreme claim that “moral distinctions are not the offspring of reason,” which understands reason to be “wholly inactive,” further reinforces the virtue-action contrast.²²⁸ These stark divisions between reason and morality, and between virtue and action, signal the final and “natural” conclusion that “morality is more properly *felt* than judged of.”²²⁹

²²⁴ Ibid., book I, chapter 3 (emph. mine).

²²⁵ In the text leading up to the quotation provided from book 1, chapter 3 of *SMP*, Hutcheson lists several features of classical moral philosophy with which his brand of pneumatical morality has little to do, law and truth included!

²²⁶ Hutcheson’s anticipation of Utilitarianism is nowhere more strongly expressed than in his *Inquiry* (II, 3): “In comparing the moral quality of actions in order to regulate our elections among various actions proposed, or to find which of them has the greatest moral excellence, we are led by our moral sense of virtue to judge thus: that in equal degrees of happiness, expected to proceed from the action, the virtue is in proportion to the number of persons to whom the happiness shall extend...so that that action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers...”

²²⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) book III, part i, section 1.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Book III, part i, section 2.

Feeling and the perception of feeling actually *constitutes* praise or blame.²³⁰ By making human nature the decisive authority of moral inquiry Hume has reduced the totality of ethical content to natural human passions by collapsing the role of deliberative reason. On his view, not only must reason remain mute within moral discourses, but so too must virtue, as it is absorbed into the feelings of personal association. Virtue is nothing but the feeling of pleasure and vice nothing but the feeling of pain.²³¹ The meaning of virtue signifies empirical principles of mind habituated and organized into a personal ‘character’. “Actions themselves,” Hume insists, “not proceeding from any constant principle have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never considered in morality.”²³² Hence, all genuine ethical inquiry is concerned with the quality of character from which action proceeded; no other origin is possible.

Passions eventually give rise to sympathy and to a specific kind of pleasure that only the sympathetic person can enjoy. Sympathy is for Hume the highest and most basic moral faculty. Functioning much like the moral sense, sympathy is socially informed and causally constructed, approving or disapproving as passions dictate. Human beings within civil society learn to accommodate one another by expressing and enjoying mutual sympathy. This is why Hume is able to redefine justice as an interior (artificial) virtue and law as a perpetuation of social custom; both justice and law become expressions of how impassioned individuals secure social cohesion through formal institutions. By universalizing human nature in this way he can separate his treatment of virtue and vice (methodologically) into two distinct parts; the *nature* of virtue and vice on the one hand, and the *function* of virtue and vice on the other.²³³ Human nature is fashioned into a function that both receives and contributes “extensive sympathy” and “limited generosity,” because “moral good and evil are distinguished by our *sentiments*, and not our *reason*.”²³⁴ Thus, if a passion

²³⁰ Ibid. Hume’s argument for the “feeling” of virtue is nowhere better expressed than in section 2 of part i (book III): “We do not infer a character to be virtuous because it pleases: but in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous.”

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Book III, Part iii, section 1.

²³³ The three parts into which book III of Hume’s *Treatise* is divided: ‘Of Virtue and Vice in General,’ ‘Of Justice and Injustice,’ and ‘Of the Other Virtues and Vices.’

²³⁴ Book III, part i, section 2.

contributes to an enduring beauty, then that passion is found immediately agreeable and absolutely trustworthy.

One of Hume's many aims is to eradicate action from moral inquiry altogether by identifying what he believes holds the true power of being—human nature. Two implications of Hume's theory of human nature merit further consideration: the internalization of value and the social ascription of identity. The internalization of value is most clearly expounded in his *Essays*. In a sequence of four essays, Hume enlists the ancient philosophic schools—Epicurean, Stoic, Platonist, and Sceptic—to face down rationalist phantoms in seventeenth and eighteenth-century moral epistemology. Of those antiquarian schools represented Hume unreservedly casts his lot with the Sceptics. The Epicurean, or “the man of elegance and pleasure,” makes pleasure the object of pursuit and pain the object of his avoidance; the Stoic, or “the man of action and virtue,” attempts to abolish desire altogether, or at the least become indifferent to it; the Platonist, or “the man of contemplation and philosophical devotion,” hopes for mind to find happiness in its most perfect object; the Sceptic, on the other hand, harbours doubt about the whole externality of an ultimate or universal object. As Hume puts it, “in a word, human life is more governed by fortune than by reason; is to be regarded more as a dull pastime than as a serious occupation; and is more influenced by particular humour, than by general principles.”²³⁵ No first principles exist that are not already qualities of mind, for “it is not from the value or worth of the object which any person pursues that we can determine his enjoyment, but merely from the passion with which he pursues it, and the success which he meets with in his pursuit.”²³⁶ One must get on with one's life as best one can. Look inside, for out there “objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves.”²³⁷

Adam Smith's moral theory, as the title of his monograph on moral philosophy suggests, overlooks the performance of action altogether. Virtue consists in the complementarity, or coherence, of virtues within the Impartial Spectator. The meaning of an action is immediately comprehended by the Impartial Spectator as virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameworthy, and only she can determine

²³⁵ See essays XV-XVIII in David Hume's *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987).

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

whether an action has upheld the “rules” of perfect prudence, strict justice, and proper benevolence.²³⁸ From what do these “rules” of perfect prudence arise? To what are they essentially associated? On his account, the rules are ontologically bound up with the intellectual faculty that evaluates moral character, the principle of approbation. Never clearly defined, the principle of approbation refers to that faculty approving or disapproving of experienced phenomena according to understood rules of virtue. Like Hume, Smith’s notion of approbation includes an element of judgment; unlike Hume, it does not rest upon grounds of utility or beauty, but upon prudence, the very unity of “superior reason” and self-command.²³⁹

“When we approve of any character or action, the sentiments which we feel are...derived from four sources: [i] we sympathize with the motives of the agent; [ii] we enter into the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of action; [iii] we observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act; and [iv] we consider such actions as making a part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society....”²⁴⁰

How this inductive process of entirely natural sentimental negotiation finds its true heartbeat in repeated evaluative judgments remains ill defined. Judgment is not identical to action. For Smith, action is an opportunity to demonstrate one has rightly empathized with and adapted to the demands of society. Of supreme importance, as it was for Hutcheson and Hume, are the origins of action grounded in a principle of sentimental approbation. Action itself is politically and legally, but not *morally*, interesting or applicable.

Ferguson on the Meaning of Action

Having given a brief review of the relevant philosophic schools with which Ferguson interacts, we are now in a position to consider Ferguson’s theory of action in its Scottish and Stoic context. The principal aim here, as with any hermeneutic enterprise, is to reconstruct as accurately as possible Ferguson’s theory of active

²³⁸ Identifying what determines an action’s success in upholding the “perfect, strict, and proper” rules would go a long way toward making sense of Smith’s conceptual division. Is it the rules, or the judgment of the rules, that determines virtue? See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).

²³⁹ Smith’s explicit criticism of Hume’s utility principle is conducted in part IV, ch. 2 of *TMS*.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, part VII, ch. 3, pt. iii.

being. Outlining ancient Stoic and eighteenth-century Scottish philosophy has meant only to provide an interpretive frame of reference for Ferguson's theory. As a way of re-presenting Ferguson's action theory as *respondent to* and not wholly dependent upon these conceptual inheritances, the interpretation I wish to offer identifies five conceptual signposts anchoring and orienting active being: (i) history, (ii) human nature, (iii) reason, (iv) virtue, and (v) futurity. Framing the theory in this way will carry the constructive advantage of revealing the *transcendent* nature of action and clarify how understanding an action's meaning demands more than meagre retreats into human personality, but an obedient endeavour into Godliness.

That the concept of action is integral to Ferguson's philosophical project is beyond any reasonable contention. The priority of action is asserted repeatedly:

To act in the view of his fellow-creatures, to produce his mind in public, to give it all the exercise of sentiment and thought which pertain to man as a member of society, as a friend, or an enemy, seems to be the principal calling and occupation of his nature. If he must labour that he must subsist, he can subsist for no better purpose than the good of mankind; nor can he have better talents than those which qualify him to act with men.²⁴¹

Or, similarly:

Men are to be estimated not from what they know, but from what they are able to perform; from their skill in adapting materials to the several purposes of life; from their vigour and conduct in pursuing the objects of policy, and in finding the expedients of war and national defence.²⁴²

Indeed, "the happiness of men in all cases alike consists in the blessings of a candid, an active, and strenuous mind."²⁴³ Active being plays a dominant role in Ferguson's thought precisely because action is dominant to life itself. He is a practical man interested in practical subjects. Of what good is philosophical inquiry if it cannot tell us how best to live our lives? He has little patience for disproportionate speculation or playful theorizing, seeing as "the parade of words and general reasonings which sometimes carry an appearance of so much learning and knowledge, are of little avail in the conduct of life."²⁴⁴ Yet when the imperative *that* one must act is wholly

²⁴¹ Adam Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

accepted and deliberations brought to a close where does that leave us? Is anything else of conceptual or practical import to the execution of acts? Yes, it is. Of particular interest to Ferguson is the history of the agent and the reality into which he acts. Every active moment is directly rooted in temporally prior moments supported always by a collective memory useful to the task at hand. Most personal skills are in fact cultivated and preserved in this manner; learning to walk, drive, read, and speak are first observed and soon followed by attempts of our own. Memory and habits are cooperative partners in tasks of propriety and yet neither is identical to nor independent of the other. Habits require a kind of memory that is not rightly called memory but rather a *surpassing* of memory—the casting of memory in a semi-permanent mould. Memory is essential to action; habit inessential. The latter makes action easier; the former makes it possible. Habit is the ingrained memory of how to act without direct attention, while memory is the force giving action its energy and course. Memory and habit contextualize actions by putting each act in touch with a history that speaks to the present.

History discloses to the historian facts that comprise the story of being. Past events express themselves as “facts” in that if an event has occurred, then the properties and effects of that event communicate what has transpired as a matter of actual historical occurrence. In this sense, anything in the past can be history to the extent that it discloses intelligible content to the present. History cannot perpetuate itself apart from the memory of an affected people. Yet memory always runs the risk of being forgotten, altered, or helplessly misrepresented; although the facts that support it can never be abolished volitionally.²⁴⁵ If ever an event was at any time apprehended by the human mind there is the chance that it will forever endure and stand as a mighty oak in the firmament of the past; but if forgotten, however, the oak returns to the dust from which it came and the living past along with it. Memories of the past challenge their indeterminacy by continually breaking through to the present. Truths of past events, though upheld beyond time in the Divine mind, are in the created order contingent upon indeterminacies of the human mind—rooted in the shifting sand of its often unreliable memory holders.

²⁴⁵ For what is easily among the greatest of treatments ever given to the nature of memory, see book X of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2007).

And yet it is within this tension of factual past and uncertain memory that the task of historiography recommends itself. History, for Ferguson, is a story of *active* being. Past actions and events recommend possibilities and the many latent obligations couched within them. The stories of action arise from history as an authoritative tutor to the present moral and political spheres.²⁴⁶ “The order of things consists in *movements*,” suggests Ferguson, “which in a state of counteraction and apparent disturbance, mutually regulate and balance one another.”²⁴⁷ Historically conceived, this “order” is the direct result of a dialectical relationship between *exertion* and *opposition*, and thus the “movement” of history tells a story of humans encountering and overcoming opposition in a way that transforms a given state of affairs. The movement of history—the passage of time—is composed of a symphony of active beings playing different parts, in different places, at different times, and with varying measures of concerted harmony. Whether one holds the cello bow or the conductor’s baton, making an impression on the narrative history of active being is a matter of taking up one’s instrument and putting it into motion. History makes action intelligible, contextualizing it within the dialectical narrative of active being.

The past carried memorably into present actions is what Ferguson identifies as the “history of active being.”²⁴⁸ To say something sensible about mankind’s present condition it is necessary to say something about what man has been like; actions simply cannot be identified as good or evil, virtuous or vicious, agreeable or disagreeable without a historical backdrop against which to contrast or contextualize them. Apart from an historical background the portrait of action remains unintelligible. Hutcheson, Hume and Smith all believed that the way to conduct a natural history of action is to get behind the intending mind.²⁴⁹ Ferguson’s

²⁴⁶ One may think here of Barth’s masterful reflection on history in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972): “We know history only when and in that something happens in us and for us, perhaps even happens against us; we know it only when and in that event concerns us, so concerns us that we are there, that we participate in it. Any knowledge of history that proved to be merely seeing, observing, establishing, is a contradiction in itself. Certainly the knowledge of human action—and that is what history is about—involves seeing, observing, establishing, but not in isolated theory.... We know history in that another’s action somehow becomes a question to which our own action has to give some sort of answer.” (emphasis mine, 15-16).

²⁴⁷ Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), vol. 1, 18.

²⁴⁸ As noted above, the *Essay*, *Institutes*, and *Principles* all begin with treatments of man’s active history.

²⁴⁹ Admittedly, Hume had his own reservations about the prospects of this strategy, though he believed the problem to be surmountable in the end: “It is remarkable concerning the operations of the mind that thought most intimately present to us, yet, whenever they become the object of reflexion,

archaeology of action, on the other hand, differs from his contemporaries' in that his method does not withdraw into the functions of the human mind for answers to the questions of the history of active being, resisting the search for mind's causal ghosts. Without first conducting a *genuinely* historical exploration of active being—an exploration of what human actions have expressed over time, that is—commonality is lost and the meaning of action eroded. The history of active being discloses the exertions of a plurality of men among and for a plurality of men. Obvious as it may seem, Ferguson's distinction here is subtle. If, as was the case with his contemporaries, the method for uncovering a history of active being is to classify psychological causes or principles of pre-action processes, then the only meaningful results of philosophical interest will be the collection of memories and quality of intellectual faculties afforded to *that particular person*. Thus, claiming that the history of active being is in truth a history of human nature is to begin with what is already a categorical mistake. Understanding how man has acted must be gleaned by an appeal to man's active history *in reality*, not to states of mind prior to action. Action is a deeply social phenomenon. Discovery of human nature is not achieved through isolated self-reflection, desperately peeling back ontological layers in search of mind's elusive intellectual phantoms. One best comes to terms with the significance of action by presenting oneself to others in society and then seeking to understand the wider meaning of the action in historical and political terms. Ferguson's *Essay* demonstrates this point rather clearly. Understanding the present is achieved by appealing to past actions chronicled in public memory. Meaningful history is nothing *less* than the history of active being, just as meaningful action is nothing less than action historically disclosed. Likewise, history is defined by the shape and force of actions past, just as actions are defined by the history brought to bear upon them through memory: it is how the two understand one another. The content of history is written by action and the content of action is written by history.

With this historically enriched theory of active being in mind, to what extent is human nature strictly natural? Ferguson is disparaging of a purely pneumatic theory of human nature and prefers instead an historical model that locates the regularities and continuities of action across time. For a particular action to be considered

they seem involved in obscurity; nor can the eye readily find those lines and boundaries which discriminate and distinguish them." See, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 13. Later, of course, Hume explains that this "uncertain and chimerical" science must still be undertaken as far as is possible.

“natural” to mankind it must be fundamentally habitual or customary. One might be tempted to call these habitual or cultural inclinations “instincts.” This would be a mistaken redefinition, however, and would identify “the natural” with purely subjective powers and overlooks the instructive forces of reality and civil society. Action is learned from society, and once learned it is *for* society that action is recommitted. Over time this giving and receiving is engrained and habituated, becoming man’s natural setting within society. “To be in society is the physical state of the species,” and “it is the state of those who quarrel, as well as those who agree; estrangement is not always a vice, nor association a virtue.”²⁵⁰

Ferguson opens his *Principles* by dividing the self into an actual state and potential state. The actual state of humankind is a subject of history and of science; whereas humanity’s potential state is a subject of moral estimation. Examinations of human nature should methodically precede examinations of its potential because “our knowledge of what any nature ought to be must be derived from our knowledge of its faculties and powers, and the attainment to be aimed at must be of the kind which these faculties and power are fitted to produce.”²⁵¹ Thus nothing separates human nature from the society in which it is placed. Ferguson challenges the problem of ahistorical pneumatics—when pneumatics precedes historiography—by questioning introspective appeals to “pure” human nature. Attempts by his contemporaries to get behind the virtues turn out to be historical descriptions of an agent’s sentiments “entertained in view of his species.”²⁵² Both Hume and Smith admittedly place great emphasis on the basic sociality of individual agency, though it is not the basic sociality of man Ferguson is here calling into question. Human nature *alone* cannot define the order of community, but neither is community the sole determinate of human nature. Identifying “sympathy” or “sentiment” as a seat of human nature simply begs the question. Upon what is sentiment founded? What are its justifying conditions? The sentimentalization of human action mistakenly exalts human nature (pneumatically conceived) as an entity unto itself, a throne from which the soul renders judgment. Human nature, insists Ferguson, cannot be reduced to basic motivational passions. Passions may, and often do, contribute to the process of deliberate action, but if they are made to *constitute* the moral goodness or badness of

²⁵⁰ *Principles*, 24.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 10 (i.e., natural history).

an action, then it is upon these passions that the blame or praise is laid. The problem with this position is that an agent's intention is entirely unobservable even to the most "impartial" spectator. Motivation is not displayed externally for public judgment. Modern law enforcement observes this truth when prosecuting perpetrators whose motive may help explain proximately but never determines conclusively the offender's ultimate guilt or innocence. Explicating motivations cannot satisfy the question of 'why?'. The concealment of intentionality from the public means it is always possible that what may first appear a benevolent action is in fact reprehensibly selfish, or what may appear an evil action may prove to have the saintliest of motives. Only God and the acting agent can be sure.

Against this type of argument, basing the goodness or badness of an act upon the passion from which it proceeded, Ferguson advances his principle of unintended consequences: "mankind, in following the present sense of their minds, in striving to remove inconveniencies or to gain apparent contiguous advantages, arrive at ends which even their imagination could not anticipate, and pass on like other animals in the track of their nature without perceiving its end."²⁵³ This principle of unintended consequences is typically applied to social and political forms in which a nation or society intends one specific objective but inevitably actualizes several other states of affairs by accident. Indeterminacy of this sort alerts us to a stark and largely unbridgeable distance separating action from intention at both a political and personal level. At the political level, for example, when elevating conquest, riches, and glory to principle aims for ever-widening territorial expansion, ancient Rome certainly did not *intend* to compromise its capital city by inadvertently spreading its military forces too thin. Compromising its beloved heartland was in this case an unintended consequence of inexorable ambition and domestic inattention. Likewise, on a personal level, a decision to go trekking in the Highlands for the purpose of refreshment and adventure might at the same time cause one's spouse to feel a sense of abandonment and insensitivity to marital responsibility.²⁵⁴ One not infrequently

²⁵³ Ibid., 118.

²⁵⁴ One may think here of St. Paul's exhortation to the church at Rome where he confesses that—"I cannot understand my own behavior...I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate" (Rom. 7:15, NJB). It is worth noting that, for Paul, action must be held in relation to Law, as he explains in the very next verse (v.16), "When I act against my own will, that means I have a self that acknowledges that the Law is good, and so the thing behaving in that way is not my self but sin living in me." Paul's instruction applies to the relationship between action and intention, not action and effect; doing what ought not be done and, in turn, not doing what ought to be done.

finds that enthusiasm, to cite yet another example, can easily (and often) be taken by others as severe aggression or perverse arrogance, and not at all like genuine excitement. The distinction to be drawn here is not that actions and intentions are incommensurable, but that intentionality cannot control the *effects* of action. Action serves rather like a buffer between intention and effect that can fully adapt to arbitrate communications. An action's moral worth cannot reside in the sum-total of that action's motivational content.

Ferguson's theory of action also embodies certain metaphysical commitments. Freedom, on his account, is best described conceptually as "dialectical": true freedom finds its fullest expression in rightful limitations, just as rightful limitations find fullest expression in freedom. Limitation gives meaning to freedom and freedom gives meaning to limitation. Confinement and freedom are to man "the principle constituents of good or of evil," for without freedom and confinement the labeling of actions as good or evil would be meaningless.²⁵⁵ Consider three fixtures of this dialectical relationship between freedom and limitation, the last of which will return us to our main discussion: law, divine foreknowledge, and reason.

Reality governs humanity with physical laws and political laws. Physical laws determine what is and is not physically possible; i.e., my throwing a baseball from here to the moon, willing myself to atomically disintegrate, and so forth. Political laws, by and large, protect and preserve the public good and limit the types of action contributing to societal degradation. Together these different types of law provide a context for meaningful action. Laws determine what is or is not, should or should not be, in one's freedom to decide. We might call these limitations that we have no say over "determinations from above." "Determinations from below," on the other hand, are limits placed on an agent by his own physical and intellectual capacity. Only so many actions are available to a person at any one time. My becoming perfectly virtuous by this afternoon's coffee, for example, is as impossible as my solving calculus equations in theoretical astrophysics. These possibilities are not (realistically) available to me because neither is in my *capacity* to achieve, not because reality itself places limitations. Yet despite being limited from "above" and "below," agency often means exercising specific freedoms over both reality (above)

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 124.

and the self (below).²⁵⁶ To exercise freedom in this way, however, requires reason, which leads us to the third concept to which action is oriented in Ferguson's theory.

Reason is inseparable from our previous two action-oriented concepts of history and human nature. For Hume, the reader will recall, reason is "wholly inactive" in morality and should not enter into our contemplation of good or evil. Hutcheson and Smith, though not as explicit in their separation of passion from reason, create a similar division which claims that virtue consists in particular "sentiments." Such "sentimentalization" of morality partly explains the mature moral psychology supporting these texts, particularly Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiries* and Smith's *TMS*. When reason is thought slave to the passions it becomes clear why moralists would be dissuaded to include reason as a central function in ethical theory, especially when reason appears in nature to be ethically neutral. But is it really the case that morality is "better felt than judged of?" Ferguson responds to this question in the negative, and for three reasons; the separation of reason from morality confuses our understanding of (i) freedom, (ii) casuistry, and (iii) judgment.

What is freedom without reason? To be faced with an authentic decision is to have no less than two options from which to decide, a criterion of truth and falsity upholding the agent's relation to reality, and possession of the intellectual faculties needed to see a decision through from inception to completion. Freedom is not the mere absence of restraint, as many modern commentators have liked to insist, but the description given to what is or is not in one's power to act upon in reality.²⁵⁷ Both the circumstances of reality and capacity of the agent give shape to action's possibilities, as Ferguson observes: "in any two situations he [the agent] must vary his pursuits, and accommodate his manner of life to the exigency of his case."²⁵⁸ Complex moral

²⁵⁶ "He [man] is in some measure the artificer of his own frame, as well as his fortune, and is destined from the first age of his being to invent and contrive. He applies the same talents to a variety of purposes and acts nearly the same part in very different scenes" (*Essay*, p.12). And yet, "...his particular pursuits are prescribed to him by circumstances of the age and of the country in which he lives: in one situation he is occupied with wars and political deliberations; in another, with the care of his interest, of his personal ease, or conveniency." (161)

²⁵⁷ Oliver O'Donovan has argued that moral freedom "can never be established on the basis of self-sufficiency and independence of the world. Freedom, if it is freedom to act *within* the world, must itself be *of* the world.... Reason has its importance only as the agent's means of purchase upon reality, and not in itself: the authority attributed to reason is more properly understood to belong to reality. We speak of 'authority'. The real world authorizes man's agency in general by being the context of its exercise, and his particular acts by being the context in which they have a point." *Resurrection and The Moral Order* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), 120.

²⁵⁸ *Principles*, 57.

situations confront us with dilemmas and quandaries no amount of impassioned virtue can assist in making the truthful moral decision about. Volition may very well contribute a dominant power to our exertions, but it should never be *identified* with pure passion. Reason always, to a lesser or greater degree, accompanies the emergence of a willful act.²⁵⁹ To be free is to have it within one's power to decide and act upon a given state of affairs, and "by this law of his nature, he is entrusted to himself as the clay is entrusted to the hands of the potter."²⁶⁰ Freedom is thus a law of human nature one is forever compelled to obey. Truth and falsity authoritatively structure practical reason and practical reason in turn structures freedom. To act freely is to have it within one's power to act rightly or wrongly; that is, to have one's action sanctioned by the same criterion of truth that authorized and legitimated the initial decision. There are unique goods found in reasonable living and each must "observe and choose among the objects around him; to make a trial of different practices; and to abide by that which is most suited to his circumstances, or to the situation in which he is *placed*."²⁶¹ In short, rational deliberation is a condition to the possibility of authentic freedom, since to act without thought is already to have acted irresponsibly.

Practical deliberation about the kinds of actions one can and should rationally undertake leads to considerations of *how* laws structuring human affairs are rightly understood. Reason's casuistic office has to do with the perception, interpretation, and application of external laws of morality. Casuistry brings subject and reality together at a moral crossroads; seeing the way things are in the world and *thinking* about how best to engage them. But what, exactly, is to be interpreted? What is the rightful goal of casuistry? If, as Ferguson suggests, "all of nature is connected, and the world itself consists of parts which like the stones of an arch mutually support and are supported," then shouldn't the moral hermeneutic one employs hold *order* as its object? To know how to do what is right in any given situation requires knowledge of the conditions that must be satisfied in order to perform the action rightly. Observation, interpretation, and execution all depend on right reason and

²⁵⁹ Ultimately, as will be seen later, the freedom of agency must be infused with the freedom found in God.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 225.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 232 (emph. mine). As will be seen later, the confrontation of agent with reality is never arbitrary or superfluous and is never wholly up to personal choice, but is an encounter "given" by "placement."

sound judgment. As Ferguson eloquently puts it, the aim is “to penetrate the order established in nature; to emulate this order...to unfold the principles of estimation and realize the conceptions of excellence and beauty in works to be executed by human art....”²⁶² Morality can no more rid itself of reason than the farmer can his plow. Reason is the instrument that unearths what is good and truthful about human action and it is incumbent on man to recognize that “human reason cannot finally acquiesce in what is found to be evil.”²⁶³ Nor, for that matter, should one refrain from doing what one knows to be good.

Deliberation of moral concepts must eventually narrow at the gateway of judgment. Judgment is considered a “gateway” in that it is primarily through judgment that reasoning passes into action. Actions pass through the gateway of judgment and with passage become decidedly moral, immoral, or amoral. Judgment makes action rational and the rational performable, thus enabling one to comprehend the meaning of another’s act as well as enabling one to enact one’s own decisions. For Ferguson, “moral judgments give *sanction* to the propriety of...character or action in the society of fellow creatures;” that is, within the context of society, moral judgments assign moral worth to character and actions.²⁶⁴ The meaning of “propriety” in the eighteenth-century did not signify what has in contemporary discussions come to mean “acceptable”; rather, the eighteenth-century held strongly to the older, classical definition of propriety as “appropriateness”, or “fittedness.” In part I, chapter 2, section ix of the *Institutes* Ferguson defines practical judgment in terms resonant with “foresight”:

Foresight is the faculty of conjecturing what is to follow from the past and present. It requires penetration and sagacity: the first, to comprehend all the circumstances of the case in question; the second, to perceive what is likely to follow from those circumstances. Penetration and sagacity are the foundations of good conduct, art and skill.²⁶⁵

What I would like to suggest is that foresight, as Ferguson defines it, is inseparably bound to deliberative judgment. The same terms used here, “penetration”, “sagacity”,

²⁶² Ibid., 206.

²⁶³ Ibid., 298.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 35.

²⁶⁵ Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing), 65.

and “art” are all used later in the *Principles* to refer to deliberate judgment.²⁶⁶ Within the language it is couched, deliberate judgment is implicitly rational. Judgment brings completion to deliberative reasoning and begins the work of executive reasoning; from reasoning about what should be done, to what is now being done.²⁶⁷

So much then for the first three of our concepts—history, human nature, and reason—and our brief interlude. The fourth concept toward which action is oriented in Ferguson’s theory is virtue. For his Scottish contemporaries, passions prompt the will to begin acting, implying that the morality of an act is determined by the character of an original, causal passion. As Smith put it, the cause is the “man of the breast,” the personification of feeling, that should face the inquisitions of morality. Actions, on his view, are the causal consequence of impassioned sentiments socially conditioned. Virtuous actions proceed from virtuous sentiments and the latter determines the moral worth of the former. For Ferguson, however, the passion or condition from which action arises has less to do with moral worth than the excellence or propriety of the action itself. Passions, whether felicitous, miserable, or magnanimous are a direct consequence of different types of action. The happiness of man is proportioned “to the exertion and application of his faculties...not to his exemption from difficulty or danger, but to the magnanimity, courage, and fortitude with which he *acts*.”²⁶⁸ Indeed, “it is mostly in some *active* exertions that happiness consists.”²⁶⁹ Happiness is the experience accompanying action itself, not a residual by-product. The priority of action to virtue is such that the “proper state of nature...is not a condition...prior to the exercise of faculties, but procured by their just application.”²⁷⁰

Subjective turns to “natural” inclination are plagued with ambiguity and only explain why the application of “natural” descriptors to human being “can serve to

²⁶⁶ The reason for the disappearance of the section on “foresight” in the *Principles* is the topic’s absorption into other subjects, and in any event, this particular contention only bears indirectly upon my main argument, which is that judgment cooperates with reason in a way that disallows omission from moral inquiry.

²⁶⁷ Expressing judgment as a type of act has been recently reiterated by Oliver O’Donovan in *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005). “Judgment is an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context.”

²⁶⁸ *Principles*, 185 (emph. mine).

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁷⁰ *Essay*, 15.

distinguish nothing,” since “all the actions of men are equally a result of his nature.”²⁷¹ The danger in making passions of human nature the starting point for moral inquiry is that *all* actions are a result of human nature and thus can always be qualified as natural. If an action is natural then it is thought to be “right” *simply because* it is natural to perform.²⁷² Identifying naturalness with rightness therefore runs the risk of reducing moral inquiry to the cataloguing of passions through personal habituation. Hume, for example, catching eye of this conceptual identification, enlists habit as a tool for assigning virtues to human nature; habits quite literally *make* a person good to the extent that they constrain or enhance passions lying behind them.²⁷³ Ferguson, on the other hand, though sympathetic to the power habits wield, insists that habit “is *not* that by which we are first inclined to act, but a disposition which results from our having *already acted*.”²⁷⁴ “Habit is known to be that by which the good or bad actions of men remain with them and become part of their characters.”²⁷⁵ Thus habits are the residue left on active being once the effects of action have made their impression. Successful cultivation of habits requires certain resistances that can take both an external and internal form; external in the form of adversity or trial in reality, and internal in the form of misdirected desire or intellectual apathy. Ferguson celebrates each encounter with resistance because each occurrence generates an occasion for overcoming challenges. Resistance to actions arise either from the ineptitudes of mind or from the adverse circumstances with which one is faced. Each conflicting occasion can and often does inhibit happiness, and might even explain why happiness cannot be an ultimate

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² An exemplary manifestation of identifying rightness with the natural is the twentieth and twenty-first century debate surrounding the ethics of homosexuality. The “nature v. nurture” debate, (tellingly) conducted mostly by psychologists, involved competing claims of whether the homosexual was “born that way” or “made that way.” As is becoming evident, this angle of approach is already misconceived, since the actions that make homosexuality what it is have been categorically excluded from consideration. Nevertheless, in both camps, though arguments differ as to how behaviors are learned, the arguments are morally identical: the moral culpability or praiseworthiness of the homoerotic expression is based entirely upon the conditions giving rise to action. In this case, the assumption of the argument is that if the action is either innate or learned, then it must be both truthful *and* good. There is no sense in blaming one who cannot act otherwise than he does act. For a much deeper engagement with this particular debate see Oliver O’Donovan’s *Church in Crisis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

²⁷³ How far have we now strayed from Aquinas’ view of *law* as that which makes man good! See Article II of Question 90 in *Treatise on Law* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1956).

²⁷⁴ Ferguson, *Principles*, 209.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 208.

object of human nature but only a consequence of action itself. The history of active being is the long story of mankind's perseverance in the face of potential negations; a story whose tragic or comedic climax depends upon whether the new state of being occasioned success or failure. Here again Ferguson's method is dialectical. In forward movements the subject encounters barriers to continuity, resistances, that result in either degradation or improvement. Actions meet resistance to the result of either negation or affirmation, and yet even if one's efforts are negated and all attempts to overcome a particular trial are thwarted it remains within one's power to rectify what *can* be rectified from the encounter.²⁷⁶ The coward, of course, will retreat from the ferocity of the trial itself or from the embarrassment that comes from having failed; whereas the courageous will make the active decision to face down adversity with the resilience necessary to act again another day.

For Ferguson, virtues are *active*. Passivity is the road to ruination paved with bricks of luxury.²⁷⁷ One is challenged with a two-fold—or dialectical—capacity of action. Action discloses the character of the actor while simultaneously forming the actor's character. The act is a type of *communication* both to the actor and to the actor's society, because "if virtue be the supreme good, its best and most signal effect is to communicate and diffuse itself."²⁷⁸ Thus the meaning or moral significance of virtue for mankind is wholly bound-up in the meaning of action itself, since, as Ferguson has told us, it is in the character of the "supreme good" to "communicate" and "diffuse" itself. The meaning of an action contains far more than can be directly determined by an agent's intentions, means, or ends. No doubt each of these leaves its own mark on the meaning of action, but even when taken collectively these three factors are not enough to determine what an action means. This is because the interpretation of an action can never fall entirely within the jurisdiction of the actor. The "unintended consequences" of an action implies that "many actions of men, by a natural connection with their motives, *discover* a meaning, as an effect discovers its cause."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ "...it is a distinction of living natures to carry a principle of active exertion in themselves. They are subject to pressure from external causes, and are acted upon; but they also act, and urge to an end, whether to gain an advantage or remove an inconvenience." (*Principles*, 12).

²⁷⁷ Ferguson's critique of luxury will be outlined in chapter four.

²⁷⁸ *Essay*, 42.

²⁷⁹ *Principles*, p.38

The possibility of action contributing unintended consequences brings our inquiry to the fifth concept around which action is oriented in Ferguson's theory—futura. Notorious for its rigid determinism, Stoic materiality suspends the temporal significance of active being. The future is inevitable and its inevitability must be accepted with personal indifference. Such determinacy similarly implicates Hume's strictly causal account of human nature. Stoic and Humean visions of the future both attach static fixity to action's vexing uncertainty. Actions mean what they were intended to mean and nothing else. However, Ferguson has already made it abundantly clear that freedom is a fact about which man is readily conscious, and "attempts to support it by argument are nugatory, and attempts to overthrow it by argument are absurd."²⁸⁰ He will have nothing to do with any metaphysic rendering an action meaningless or that attempts to reduce the meaning of action to pure intentionality. Even so, each action requires at least a degree of fixity or immutability as an ordered context for the appropriation of meaning. Permanence is essential to understanding the impression an action makes on the fabric of reality. Action must present itself within a context of stable permanence accommodating to its blunt force and inherent creativity to be recognizable. The context of action is not "permanent" *per se*, but enduring; comprised of real fixtures that make action possible. Reality and action belong communicatively to one another as sentences belong to paragraphs. When a friend tells us they have been fishing all weekend, for example, our minds immediately covet more imaginative furniture. Where did the fishing trip take him? What kind of fishing did he do? How many fish did he catch? Our mind casts its nets to gather as much imagery as will help form an idea of what the action means. By virtue of having a place, action can be interpreted for either its uniformity or uniqueness, but only by virtue of its contextual backdrop can action establish itself as helpful or hurtful, good or evil, praiseworthy or blameworthy. As another example, it seems a fact of human existence that "the sentence of nature is equally pronounced upon all, that the longest liver must die," and yet the dust to which one returns is, as the Stoics took pains to point out, always entirely within the hands of the agent.²⁸¹ The necessity of death and the fact that death is always one's own-most possession illustrate vividly the complex relation between freedom and contextual

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 152.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p.17. C.f. Hume's "Of Suicide," in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. R. H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 97-105.

action. Other less extreme examples might also be proposed: the writing of a poem, passing judgment on a case, or even driving an automobile. All such actions, though done freely, must observe and respect the laws guiding their performance. Poems follow certain meters, judgments adhere to civil procedures, and driving insists on relentless attentiveness to motorway codes. Finally, of course, there is the plain fact that an action must be performed at a particular time and at a particular place, and not some other time and place. The future guides and gives shape to freedom and yet does not *determine* what will be the case in every state of affairs. The fixtures of reality persist while their occasioning in time constantly changes. Action shapes the future just as future shapes action.

But what do future unknowns mean for the possibilities of action? Is the mystery of what is to come a justifiable reason for indifference? Ferguson's response is offered primarily in section xiv of chapter III, entitled "Of a Future State," providing an extended treatment of "man's progressive nature", and takes the following form. First, it outlines what it means for a person to be stationary or progressive and then defines what principles of progression mean for human nature. Immediately following this brief outline of progress Ferguson takes a more comprehensive look at the nature and function of habituation. This then leads nicely into an engagement with "ambition," or "the desire of something higher than is possessed at present," and goes on to show how habits and ambition contribute to commerce, politics, and fine arts. The chapter then closes its final two sections with "progress in moral apprehension" and "a Future State." What this movement of thought reveals is Ferguson's view of *how* the future and agent encounter one another. With various habits, aspirations, and pursuits the dynamic active being confronts the future with powers that the future does not itself possess, while the future confronts the active being with exhortation and mediation. With its regular opportunistic charm, the future encourages action by communicating what kinds of action may or may not contribute to the Good and thus may run the risk of meriting reward or punishment. Man's nature, even if progressive, cannot be relieved of the moral obligation to offer distinct goods. If habits or ambitions do not pursue moral objects they are evil and altogether blameworthy. Actions either negate the good or affirm it—neutrality is impossible. Indifference, too, is impossible. Habits harness excessive passions but the final goal of habit is not to eliminate passion or cultivate indifference. Habits *order* passion. This is why Ferguson condemns only personally or socially corrupting ambitions; ambitions which strive for excellence will not likely be found wrongful.

Dr. Johnson's vaguely general definition for "ambition" as the "desire of something higher than is possessed at present" represents for Ferguson a future of ardent participation in the life of God. When applied to moral understanding ("apprehension"), ambition draws active being toward the resources meant to aid in rightful conduct. "To know himself and his place in the system of nature is the specific lot and prerogative of man," insists Ferguson, but can only be acquired by actively pursuing this prerogative.²⁸² Indifference to the future would be for man a moral nemesis, a defeater to the good life manifest in future possibilities.

Hutcheson's assertion that future happiness awaits the completion of acts, in all its utilitarian splendor, dislodges happiness from the act itself and segregates it to consequences the act intended to bring about.²⁸³ Ferguson, of course, argues to the contrary. Happiness and order belong to the action itself, not to consequences that follow performance. The consequences of an action are not within the actor's control and many are set in motion unintentionally. The possibility of future happiness rests not in consequences, but in *hope* inherent to action itself.²⁸⁴ Futurity reveals opportunities for action while simultaneously blinding us to what the actions may ultimately accomplish. Each active being places hope in what the future may allow and trusts that what is *presently* known and demanded can in fact be acted upon. "To man, the proper subjects of knowledge are the present and the past: yet, in some instances, the knowledge of these is a knowledge of the future also."²⁸⁵ This is the will of God, concludes Ferguson, "that man should attend to his present task and not suffer himself to be diverted from it by prospects of futurity, towards which he can contribute nothing, besides the faithful and diligent performance of a part which is now assigned to him."²⁸⁶ The axiom for man's future is *Hoc age*, to "mind what you are about."²⁸⁷ Providence invites one to mind what one is about and leave the future to One who rules eternal.

²⁸² See "Of the Progress of Moral Apprehension," part I, ch. 3, sect. xiii (306).

²⁸³ Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, II.3

²⁸⁴ Robert Spaemann's fascinating treatment of "equanimity", which he defines as "the attitude of someone who regards what he cannot change as a meaningful limit to his ability to act and who accepts this limit", appears congruous to the account provided here by Ferguson. See *Basic Moral Concepts* (London: Routledge Press, 1989), 85.

²⁸⁵ *Principles*, 319.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

In recent decades it has become popular to characterize Ferguson as the Scottish stoic reaching back into antiquity to remind fellow patriots of a national glory once idyllically embodied by Rome.²⁸⁸ This reading is drawn mainly from isolated readings of specific texts and remains inattentive to the wider unity of his thought. Ferguson is at best a *partial* stoic. Certain stoic references appear throughout his writings, of course, but these instances must be integrated into Ferguson's overall world-picture and situated on the hierarchy of his intellectual priorities. As it pertains to active being, what is of greatest interest to us is the degree to which Ferguson adopts, modifies, or altogether departs from a characteristically Stoic ethic. Stoicism has its own untidy history, as is well known, and in the hands of readers centuries removed it has been forced to take a variety of uncomfortable positions, but untidiness aside a constructive description of Stoic action theory would help better contextualize Ferguson's reception of it.

First, the nature of human desire is far and away the most dominant and regularly reviewed theme of the ancient stoic literature and it only makes sense as an article of action. Apart from action the contemplation of desire is purely superfluous. Given this Stoic starting point, one's aspirations are to become personally indifferent to desires that impinge human capacity. When faced with a fixed future the best one can do is become unresponsive to life's pressures. Desire management makes it humanly possible to then perform all actions with "fittedness." The Roman stoic Cicero indicates there are no less than three types of action: virtuous actions, vicious actions, and *intermediates*, i.e. actions fitting or unfitting.²⁸⁹ Whether his view truly presents the most philosophically exacting version of stoic action is at this juncture immaterial; what interests us is this property of "fittedness." *Kathekon*, often rendered "appropriate" or "befitting" action by modern translators, was conceived as *officium* by Cicero and thus in its transition from Greek to Latin contained a subtle

²⁸⁸ For slightly different views on the same interpretation of Ferguson as Stoic, see Jane Fagg, *Adam Ferguson: Scottish Cato* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), and David Kettler, *The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965).

²⁸⁹ Cicero, *Academica Posteriora*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1913) book I, ch. 37. The appropriateness or inappropriateness of an action, moreover, can emerge only from the circumstantial context from which the action arises and to which the action must respond. The shape of any action's circumstantial fit should not be confused with modern Stoic revivalists, e.g., Kant, and the idea that duties are "categorical." Elsewhere, in *De Officiis*, Cicero seems to have understood *Kathekon* in terms of 'ordinary'—in the sense of not 'absolute'—duty, which must be reasonably justified. Both absolute and ordinary duties carry political import, but with varying degrees. See Loeb Translation by W. Miller (London: Heinemann, 1913), 1.3.8.

conceptual alteration from the generic impression an action makes on the texture of reality to the “service” or “reasonable duty” one has to one’s society. In this way, the meaning of the idea *kathekon* was diversified even at its inception. Cicero’s bringing political specificity to fitting action does not alter the way an action should be performed: action should exhibit “rightness” in its performance regardless of whether the action carries political implications. To say that actions must conform to a standard of rightness—or righteousness—is to draw upon language alerting us to limitations, boundaries, and standards. For an action to be capable of achieving rightness it must be equally capable of achieving wrongness, and this differentiation implies a pre-existing criterion for judgment. Action is defined as much by the reality in which it is performed as by the resources devoted to its execution. Reality, on the other hand, will disclose what can possibly be accomplished as well as how what *can* be done *could* be done. From a purely physical point of view, for an agent to perform an action in reality means that the subject can by definition do *something* but cannot do *anything*. For the Stoic this is equally true from the moral point of view, given that physical reality helps shape what *should* in fact be done. The goodness of an act cannot be considered in isolation either from the performing subject or from the circumstances occasioning action. Reality might provide the contextual boundaries within which meaningful action can take place, but it cannot by itself determine the relative character or excellence of the subject’s action. The propriety of an action is first a matter of what has presented itself to us. Understanding brought to this presentation imposes obligations and only *reason* can differentiate what can be done from what should be done. J. M. Rist has summed up this reason-reality interface by explaining that “in the Stoic world there is only one thing which can be called good without any qualification whatsoever...the providentially ordered life in accordance with reason.”²⁹⁰ The good to be achieved through action evades immediate understanding. Goodness, particularly the good to be achieved by action, first requires recognition—*katalepsis*—then contemplation. Prior to action one must give deliberate reflection both to what should be done, as well as to how that dutiful action might best be carried out. This is a critical feature of the Stoic account of action: intentionality is not the *sole* determinate of an action’s moral goodness because each such action must also be performed with a measure of excellence. Genuinely moral deeds must answer the questions of why and how to go about such

²⁹⁰ J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 13.

and such a task. Put in these terms, the reasons for describing action as either affirming truth or careening into falsity become definitive. To have performed an action truthfully is to have dealt rightly with reality; to have truly recognized how to do what is right. For the Stoic, truth and goodness hold transcendent jurisdiction over the realm of subjects in nature; they cannot be comprehensively defined and yet cannot be overlooked. Cicero depicts this narrative of moral learning as man's attempt to bring action into "conformity" with the goods of reality, that is, with the goods of nature as presented in reality itself. In *homologia* ('conformity') "resides that Good which is the End to which all else is a means, moral conduct and Moral Worth itself, which alone is counted good...and is nevertheless the sole thing that is for its own efficacy and value desirable."²⁹¹

Before concluding our treatment of Ferguson's partial stoicism it would be useful to comment on two additional stoic concepts. First, it is everywhere assumed in Stoic literature that only virtue is good in itself. Action on this view is merely the outcome or result of a particular quality of virtue. But is it really the case that only virtue can be good in itself? Could not action, too, be considered a true good? The trouble with vesting goodness squarely in virtue is that virtue is itself formed by a particular excellence of action. Acquiring virtue is consequent upon the nature of an action already conducted; that is, by doing good deeds and thereby becoming good. "Repetition of the right action will forward the development of a right concept (*ennoia*) in the soul."²⁹² Hume referred to such formation as "habituation." Either way, it is not in *passivity* that virtue is acquired, but in *activity*. Virtue alone cannot be called good in itself. The second lingering concept, on the other hand, has a less direct bearing on a Stoic understanding of action. How is action to be understood when the external determinations impressed on action by the laws of reality lay wholly outside one's control? In bringing this question to the fore we have come around full circle, since it was with the abolition of desire that this treatment of Stoicism began. The rationale for eliminating desire, as is well known, is to embolden individuals to face down the unknowns of future affairs with fortitude and temperance. Such future states of affairs will somewhat paradoxically include a subject's own contributions to an approaching reality already entirely pre-

²⁹¹ Cicero, *De Finibus*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1913), book III, ch. 21.

²⁹² *Stoic Philosophy*, 14.

determined. *Kathekon*, then, is the best one can do when certain consequences are erased from the content of action and the wise man is all that remains: “for the Stoic view is that happiness, which means life in harmony with nature, is a matter of seizing the right moment...so that Wisdom her very self upon occasion bids the Wise Man to leave her.”²⁹³

Artistry, Communication, and Trans-temporality in Commerce

The compatibility of Ferguson’s action theory with Christian ethics is most noticeable in his use of conceptual tensions, dualisms, and dialectics framing exertive enterprises in the world. Notice the language he uses to describe properties of active being and the reality onto which actions make their mark: the language of “good” and “evil” triumphs over the use of “happy” and “miserable”; the language of “right” and “wrong” prevails upon “approbation” and “disapprobation”; and the mind-body dualism presumed throughout the *Principles* places him in direct contrast to Humean reductions.²⁹⁴ Man is both partially free and partially determined; he acts and is acted upon; he is autonomous and yet is necessarily social. Creator and created, ruler and ruled, active being and passive being are all tensions to which Ferguson gives repeated reference. The “unity of being” so revered by Stoicism is for Ferguson the direct result of man’s participation in the work of providence:

The highest point to which moral science conducts the mind of man is that eminence of thought from which he can view himself as but a part in the community of living natures; by which he is in some measure let into the design by God, to combine all the parts together for the common benefit of all; and can state himself as a willing instrument for this purpose, in what depends on his own will; and as a conscious instrument at the disposal of providence, in matters which are out of his power.²⁹⁵

This notion of agency as *instrumental* participation in the life of God is how the Christian tradition has characteristically conceived of its mission. St. Paul’s instruction on Christian action, for example, illustrates the point rather well: one is to fulfill their particular part in the wider body of Christ (1 Cor. 12); offer oneself as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1); and put on the new man while sloughing off the old

²⁹³ *De Finibus*, book III, ch. 63.

²⁹⁴ The language of “happy” or “miserable” and “approbation” or “disapprobation” is most directly applicable to Smith’s *TMS*, which is, as the title indicates, essentially a sentimentalization of ethical theory.

²⁹⁵ *Principles*, 313.

(Col. 3:9-10). Each metaphor represents for Paul an active, albeit submissive, participation in the life of God that is always secondarily for the church and common good. The unity of being coheres in God. The word used by St. Paul to refer to action—*praxis*—is used sparingly in his letters. He is more inclined to use *energeia*, often translated as “labour,” or “striving.” This particular term, from which moderns have derived the word “energy,” implies a type of *effort*, an exerting of one’s powers for the specific purpose of achieving objectives.²⁹⁶ For God’s part, this *energeia* is effortless; an efficacious operation performed by God within the individual.²⁹⁷ God acts in us so that we may act in Him; a participatory life St. Paul compares to “offering oneself as a living sacrifice” and “walking in the Spirit.”²⁹⁸ Active movement into God’s own activities means the disciple has “stripped off old behaviour” and his “old self,” and has “put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its creator” (Col. 3:9-10). What is at the centre of this “true knowledge?” “There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything” (Col. 3:11). In conjunction with the language of “newness” Paul concurrently utilizes the political and juridical language of “obedience,” “submission,” “charity” and “justice.” Indeed the letter to the Romans is in many respects a jurisprudential and political elucidation of the Gospel message. For Paul, the task of each citizen is to observe and strictly adhere to the law (lowercase ‘l’), submit to the authorities, and love one’s neighbor as oneself. The jurist in Paul conceives of life as an ordered totality for whom “to live is Christ”; the essence of order, truth, and goodness. The “fitting” life for man is to become the “bond-slave” of Christ and submit steadfastly to his absolute authority. The object of life therefore is to align oneself obediently with the good as expressed and ordered by his rule. And although Paul is being taken only as an example from the Christian tradition, this configuration is strangely resonant with Ferguson’s vision for active being. ‘Putting on the new man’ complements Ferguson’s reflections on moral ambition and the striving for excellence; to submit to the law is to obediently perform actions “fitting” the shape of obligation; juridical and “energetic” languages are used routinely and interchangeable by Ferguson throughout his written corpus. A

²⁹⁶ This “exertion” is put forth predominantly by God and secondarily by man, but is also occasionally effected by impersonal forces such as sin, death, and the word.

²⁹⁷ A few examples for which there are many include: 1 Cor. 12:6; Phil. 2:13; Col. 2:12; Eph. 1:11, 19-20.

²⁹⁸ Rom. 12:1; Gal. 5:13-26

brief overview of three overarching themes will strengthen the connection I am attempting to draw between Ferguson's theory of action and his Christian commitments, which for the sake of clarity will be broadly titled: Art, Communication, and Time.

In both his *Essay* and *Principles*, Ferguson draws heavily upon the language of "art." All action must exhibit a degree of excellence and should therefore be performed *artistically*. To perform an action with artistry is to perform a deliberate—in the sense of "deliberation," not the truncated, late-modern "intentionality"—action excellently and with a definite good as one's principal object. In other words, the action must be properly deliberated, masterfully performed, and carried out in such a way that it contributes both to the common good and to the good of God's kingdom. Artistry is what gracious providence both demonstrates and invites. "It is in the wisdom of God, not the deliberate effect of invention or choice which the created being is fitted to employ himself... [that] his task is *prescribed* and his manner of performing it secured."²⁹⁹ The best one can do is give every effort to the task God assigns; to take up one's work with an artistry exuding gratitude and striving for imitation. For "man is formed for an *artist*; and he must be allowed, even when he mistakes the purpose of his work, to practice his calling in order to find out for himself what is best for him to perform."³⁰⁰

In addition to owning artistic quality, actions should also communicate on each performance. Since one comes to understand how to act artistically from those who have come before, actions communicate primarily through the institution of custom, disclosing and forming personal characters simultaneously. Past actions communicate with the future through the megaphone of the present. Creation is configured in such a way that "the chain of communication extends from one to many, from species to species, and even from world to world, throughout the intellectual as well as material system of nature."³⁰¹ Actions artistically performed, therefore, are a type of noiseless speech directed toward the community into which the action was undertaken and unto the God who oversees every exertive enterprise no matter how trivial. "Arts *communicate*," suggests Ferguson, "by information and

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 53.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 299.

³⁰¹ *Principles*, vol. II, p.324.

example, from the master to his pupil and from passing generation to that which succeeds it; so that the progress of the human species is not, like other animals, limited to the individual or to the age; but communicated from one to another, and continued from age to age.”³⁰² The content of meaningful action accumulates with each and every inheritance. A new age receives from the old a body of instruction that takes aim at an everlasting target. The idea, as is stressed throughout Biblical literature, is to make contributions that do not perish but are chronicled in the listless volumes of public memory. Positive or negative, virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameworthy, what ultimately comes of an action cannot be controlled and thus the certitude surrounding its achievements released. The aim of artistic action is simply to give something of charitable endurance to the world.

Lastly, artistry and communication partner cooperatively in the encompassing and nurturing arms of time. Every action performed with artistry communicates, and every communication brings together past, present, and future so that all three moments are made one in the unifying power of active being. Action makes the present feel existentially real by maintaining a contiguous vision of the future and past, creating “moments” in which time’s passage is “presented.” The fleeting character of the present is only temporarily overcome when action takes the past in one hand, the future in the other hand, and combines them into an ontological present. Action is to a large degree trans-temporal and yet it alone leaves a mark on the temporal realm. To act faithfully is to act simultaneously in *and* upon time, explaining *why* every action should be artistic and communicative. “Men are equally engaged by the past, present, and future,” suggests Ferguson, “and are prepared for every occupation that gives scope to their powers.”³⁰³

But what brings ultimate unity to artistic actions communicated in and across time? For Ferguson, the answer is God. “The past, the present, and the future are but one object to the supreme intelligence of *God*, why not also to the created mind, so far as it is qualified to partake in this view of things, and can delight in contemplating the effects of eternal beneficence, whether past, present or future?”³⁰⁴ It is from God that one receives the wisdom necessary to conduct an act artistically; it is by the

³⁰² Ibid., 175.

³⁰³ *Principles*, vol. I, 164.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 335.

power of God that actions are communicated in and upon time; and it is because God himself actively communicates with his children in time that humanity itself is empowered to act and communicate. Artistic communication in and across time is an *identical imitation of how God himself acts*. Ferguson can therefore emphatically affirm Paul's declaration that God "is everything and is in everything"—our "all in all." All good and truthful action is *imitatio dei*; a righteous performance "by, in and for" the God whose creative artistry communicates responsively with mankind in and over time. His creative communication actualizes goods through the use of his "instruments"—his people—to perpetuate order and meet human needs. In acting righteously one trusts that God is in and behind the act, bringing about the very best that that action can possibly bring about.³⁰⁵ The meaning of action is disclosed in the riches of history; it "discovers" a meaning, as Ferguson has told us, and ultimately comes to mean what Providence decides. Action is taken up into the caring arms of the *Alpha* and *Omega* of active being.

The significance of Ferguson's active triad—artistic, communicative, and trans-temporal—is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than by its application to the commercial sphere. The commercial order, such as it existed in Ferguson's time, was in many respects still an artisan culture. Occupations were usually dictated to individuals by circumstances lying entirely outside their control; birth order, family rank, political conflict, and agricultural stability name only a few. Nearly all professions, whether of statesman, farmer, mason, or trader, required an element of *craftsmanship*. Each profession was mutually dependent upon the other, and so how well one performed their trade was crucial to their continued subsistence and reputation. Prudence applied to one's occupation best serves the community and satisfies one's own familial needs. For the tradesman of eighteenth-century Scotland, craftsmanship was the defining virtue of actions directed to commercial ends.

In an age where members of western societies are pressed to direct all activity toward commercial outlets, it is difficult to imagine a world in which one's economic actions would be judged precisely *by* their quality. The decisive question for our purposes is whether something vitally important has been lost. Is it at all strange that

³⁰⁵ Along similar lines, Robert Spaemann has remarked that religion is "characterized by the fact that it sees both [the success and failure of action] as having the same cause. On the one hand God is seen as the source and guarantor of moral obligation. On the other hand He is seen as the Lord of History; that is to say that He is still honored even if our good intentions fail, and, what is more, He is seen as the guarantee that good intentions will ultimately be reconciled with the course of history."³⁰⁵

to be an ‘artist’ in the late-modern world is, as it were, to occupy a sanctified category of almost pitiable *inactivity* in the truest sense of the word? Why has the artistic quality of commercial labours been lost? Without answering a question that will be taken up more explicitly in the next chapter, it is sufficient here simply to hint at the abstract and highly individualized character of contemporary economic models. The actual tasks that one undertakes in today’s economy are dissolved into the unrelenting and ever-retreating goals of capital acquisition, which sweeps up into its forceful progress all labour and translates it into “liquidity.” One often gets the impression that they have become cogs in a larger system with little care of, or attention to, what one does with one’s labours. The economy’s enormous growth has reduced labour to a mechanical function, where one’s “employment” typically takes the form of turning knobs, pulling levers, or clicking buttons. It goes without saying, perhaps, that there are certain creative limits to organizing spreadsheets.

The virtual abstraction that marks all considerations of modern economy also negatively effects how commercial actions are communicated. On Ferguson’s account good and truthful actions are performed unto God and neighbor. In eighteenth-century Edinburgh normal exchanges between different members of society were conducted on familiar terms; one knew their partner in exchange, their produce and reputation, and that was why they did business together. A neighbor was someone known in friendship or trust. Such a level of familiarity is almost impossible to achieve in contemporary economies, since the person or persons with whom one does business are unlikely to be persons at all, but a collection of invisible shareholders, or worse, an electronic program behind a corporate brand. But this burdensome situation, which admittedly some workers do not see as burdensome in the slightest but simply “the way things are,” arises out of a logically prior quandary involving the conferral of market goods and labour. Perhaps the most demeaning implication of modern labour’s continued mutation from craft to function in western economies is the fact that one’s labours seem quite literally to go nowhere and contribute nothing. Enormous amounts of human energy are devoted to labours that are only to be taken up into the market machine, processed, and squeezed for every drop of value. Who exactly does this taking, processing, and squeezing cannot be identified with great specificity, of course, because it remains largely unclear what *real* thing is being contributed. When an office administrator circulates memos, answers telephones, and photocopies reports, for example, *where*, exactly, does the labour go? What is the character of their contribution? How are those who never

interact with physical objects—minus computational devices, of course, since that is the only means for “producing” in any economy without physical matter—to understand their place or involvement in the wider “business model?” Such questions allude to the onerous dilemma of being unaware of how one fits within the economic order or of how one’s commercial enterprises communicates with others. If one of my neighbors is a systems analyst and the other neighbor a web technician, how or what do their actions communicate in the commercial sphere, if they deliver any content at all?

For Ferguson, it is clear that when one submits oneself as an instrument to God’s purposes, every action so conducted becomes a candidate for trans-temporal endurance. Given the tendency of modern economy to minimize artistic action and communicative action from the commercial sphere, the question to be put to the modern economist is how or whether one can act in today’s economy *for* God and his kingdom? When a job is by all intents and purposes completely arbitrary, or could just as easily be left undone, how is one to consider their work a legitimate contribution, much less an *eternal* one? Every member of society wishes to leave behind something permanent and enduring, something that can be given as a gift to one’s neighbors and to generations still to come. Under contemporary economic circumstances, however, there is little way of knowing what, exactly, one’s commercial actions realistically accomplish and therefore everyone’s attempt to leave something behind is surrendered to forces beyond their control. So much of what is enacted laboriously with eternal intentions loses its way when incorporated into the market machine that the machine itself now confuses between the kinds of commercial action that truly last and those that merely generate capital. If it lives on, it will do so in the form of fiscal liquidity and eventually find its way into unimagined pockets.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to contrast Ferguson with schools of thought to which he has typically been aligned and to expose some uniquely *Christian* commitments undergirding his theory of action. Commercially, his theory rescues labour from the throes of inactivity and meaninglessness. Good and rightful action participates in the Divine life by imitating Divine action. To imitate the actions of God is to perform actions of artistry that communicate in and through time.

Therefore to act in view of Divine action is to act “by, in and for” God, since “there is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything” (Col. 3:11). Christ’s deathly utterance, “it is *accomplished*,” signifies the end of action for mankind in the sense that it is no longer by his action that man sacrificially redeems himself, and yet also reinforces the *imperative* to act by demonstrating that it is only by his action that man can participate in God’s redemptive purpose for the world. Christ’s death and resurrection exemplifies what every human life must pursue, the overcoming of adversity for the actualization of something new. For “if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and all things have become new.” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Chapter 4

Political Institutions

With previous considerations of history and action in mind, this chapter will assess Adam Ferguson's identification of moral tensions in modern commerce. If, ultimately, we want to understand why the specific brand of democratic capitalism we have inherited appears to create and antagonize political disorder, if we detect a problem in the present configuration of the marketplace, how then has the problem of disorder arisen? In what way do the political and economic spheres relate to one another? How do the controls and commitments of market ideology become systemically embedded in political structures? Such questions are responded to insightfully by Ferguson, and his perceiving moral and political problems so early in the genesis of capitalism highlights the fact that even in its beginning, its ends were often contradictory.

Responding to this question of how certain economic institutions and practices compromise the political architecture of western modernity requires a slight methodological turn. This essay will broaden the Fergusonian portrait by sketching his account of a morally and politically subservient commercial order. We will begin, perhaps unexpectedly, with his advocacy for the establishment of local militias, which affords useful insight into his militaristic hermeneutic and illuminates rationale for his Principle of Defense. With the militia issue in mind we will then rehearse the movement of Ferguson's argument as presented in the *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Here we are determined to make the historical and moral character of his political thought as clear as possible. The history of civil society discloses distinct patterns and developments, continuities and discontinuities, helping us diagnose how and why history experiences transitions as it does. Ferguson narrates for us a misfortune that has occurred before in the history of society and will likely occur again. Grasping the historical texture of the story will allow us to proceed at last to the moment of methodological shift where application of his argument to contemporary western societies will be most suitable. It will be particularly important at this stage to resist venturing into wild abstractions. To avoid

the temptation of wandering into the no-man's-land of theoretical economic "modeling," concrete examples will be incorporated to illustrate the astuteness of Ferguson's account and highlight the extent to which commercial forces have usurped control of political institutions. On final pass it will be clear how this deposition has occurred and what the moral significance of this change might be for dis-integrated capitalist societies.

The Militia Issue

Even after his honorable discharge Ferguson's military service never really concluded. Taking a degree in Classics at St. Andrews, he matriculated afterward to the School of Divinity at Edinburgh for ordination in 1742. But due to pressing political circumstances abroad ministerial training customarily requiring six years for ordinands to complete Ferguson was invited to satisfy in only three. The Black Watch highland regiment required a Gaelic-speaking chaplain to serve his majesty's continental campaign and selection for this particular post in this particular detachment called for the most delicate precaution. The country being still very much at war with France, the campaign could not afford destructive espionage from Stuart sympathizers holding an office as strategic and potentially explosive as regiment chaplain. Ferguson was quickly examined, ordained, and made fit for service. In 1745 he joined the Black Watch at Flanders. His Flemish exploits were not long enjoyed, however, for no sooner had he arrived than the Watch was pulled from the front lines of Europe to defend Yorkshire against the renewed Jacobite threat from the north. But the regiment would have been among the last units to deploy against the young Pretender's forces and, in the end, it saw only limited action; clannish papists were far too untrustworthy to be thrust into battle with their own kin. After the defeat of Prince Charles threats to the throne dwindled and the Watch was soon deployed to Ireland where it would remain for the next several years. The unit was still stationed in Ireland when Ferguson resigned from active service in 1754.

He spoke fondly, even romantically of his military service because that is how he conceived of it—as *service*. To be a military man required submission to an exceptional class of discipline, order, masculine virtue, and honor; military service epitomized a civic service above which no higher display could be achieved. In this regard Ferguson's loyalties lay decisively with Great Britain, which were what decided his assignment to the Watch in the first place and was later confirmed in turn

by his *Sermon in Ersh Language*.³⁰⁶ Roughly ten years later and well into his retirement from active duty he published the mildly contentious pamphlet, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia*.³⁰⁷ His principle argument that militia service makes a positive contribution to civil society and affords the enlisted an opportunity to exercise virtues of courage and self-discipline held much to the classical line. “Self defense is the business of all,” he insists, and to establish local militias two things are required: that rotating members of the militia familiarize themselves with weaponry, and an order of authority instituted for the “habit of military obedience.”³⁰⁸ Standard objections to militias are then recited and quickly dismissed with underdeveloped, if not wholly inadequate rebuttals. Or so it would seem. Perhaps the better reason for his use of weaker or near impotent responses to his critics is that the *Reflections* primarily addresses establishment of militias and the benefits they bestow upon civic virtues and to local defense, and in doing so reveals along the way to its conclusion a deep suspicion harbored toward maintenance of permanent standing armies. He supports militias, but not nearly as much as he opposes the expense and potential tyranny of standing armies. This is precisely why his response to objections in the pamphlet comes across muted; the establishment of purely defensive militias is a lesser evil than the tyrannical threat of a standing army. The argument could not have been put more cautiously.

On this issue Ferguson stands within a tradition of Scottish political suspicion. Nearly sixty years prior the able parliamentarian and political theorist Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun had also proposed the establishment of militias, and with more constructive detail. Fletcher explained how, in his own time, “most princes of Europe are in possession of the sword by standing mercenary forces kept up in time of peace, absolutely depending upon them,” and how “all such governments are changed from monarchies to tyrannies.”³⁰⁹ Maintaining standing armies was the ultimate error of

³⁰⁶ Adam Ferguson, *A Sermon Preached in the Ersh Language to His Majesty's First Highland Regiment of Foot, Commanded by Lord John Murray, At their Cantonment at Camberwell, on the 18th Day of December 1745. Being appointed as a Solemn Fast*. (London: 1746).

³⁰⁷ Adam Ferguson, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1756).

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 20. On this and other subjects, especially the ownership and use of arms, Ferguson is perhaps indebted to Machiavelli's *Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and to Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³⁰⁹ Andrew Fletcher, “A Discourse of Government with relation to Militias,” in *Political Works*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

the Roman Empire, which on Fletcher's account represents the fall of antiquity's last great standing army. From the gradual division of the Roman Empire arose a network of territories governed by kings, subdivided for barons, and then subdivided again for vassals; everyone had access to productive property or had at least secured general means of subsistence. By the turn of the eighteenth-century however, the economy's adverse effects were wearing this conception of militarism ruinously thin. "The only remaining security we have," complained Fletcher, "is that no standing armies were ever yet allowed in time of peace, the parliament of England having so often and so expressly declared them to be contrary to law."³¹⁰ The 1689 Bill of Rights had set preventative measures that no standing army could be maintained without the express consent of parliament. By Fletcher's lights this "consent" was being grossly stretched and it seemed only a matter of time before these measures were seen as all but unbinding ceremony. In truth, *power* is the fulcrum of politics. To give the monarch a standing army "puts his power beyond control, and consequently makes him absolute."³¹¹ The sword constitutes the true force behind political will and the bitter tip of its authority. When tyranny quickens, little protects the citizenry from a monarch's sprawling controls, for, as J. G. Pocock has commented, "once armies were paid for by taxes, taxes were collected by armies and the liberties of nearly all Europe were at an end."³¹² Still worse, one can assume any ruler thus empowered will turn readily to conquest. But "conquest is not in our interest," insisted Fletcher, because it consumes both life and treasure—the very things that conquests are meant to improve—with deplorable alacrity.³¹³ Tyranny expresses itself domestically as a suppression of personal and public freedoms, and internationally as a deleterious program for conquest. Establishing a standing army would therefore mean the beginning of national enslavement and explains why "a good militia is of such importance to a nation."³¹⁴

For Ferguson the problem is slightly more nuanced. Maintenance of standing armies may formally establish certain irrecoverable political compromises, but more troublesome by far is the negative impact a loss of civic participation might have on

³¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 430.

³¹³ Ibid., 30.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

the moral character of individual agents, and by extension to civil society itself. Societies unexercised in military responsibility are gradually susceptible to alien domination as they prove themselves devoid of masculine virtues necessary *to defend the cities of their God*. The martially unprepared are never genuinely free. Several years later when Ferguson expanded his lectures, published as *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, in a section on the meaning of political liberty he takes aim at the doctrinaire classification of liberty as an “absence of restraint,” defining it instead as “the operation of just government and the exemption from injury of any sort, rather than merely an exemption from restraint; for it actually implies every just restraint.”³¹⁵ Freedom is not gained by jettisoning restraints, but by implementing and actively enforcing *just* restraints. Conceptually, freedom implies protective measures. So important is the protective impetus of freedom that “security, in fact, is the essence of freedom, and if security is to be obtained under political establishment alone, there also is freedom obtained.”³¹⁶ Freedom and security belong to one another.

In rejecting the idea of liberty realized by the absence of restraint, he also rejects the notion of freedom consisting in equality of station or rank. The trouble with fusing liberty and equality, he thinks, is “individuals are destined to inequality from their birth,” which then leads naturally to “all the varieties of possession and fortune.”³¹⁷ In truth, “the only respect in which all men continue forever to be equal is that of the equal right which every man has to defend himself,” although this clearly admits an inequality in the things to be defended.³¹⁸ Defense of person and property is the only equity. The conditions of society may become unequal, even grossly so, but “it is impossible to prevent the inequality of condition in the fortunes of men without violating the first and common principles of right in the most flagrant manner.”³¹⁹ For government to force equality upon a people is to violate the basic right to defend one’s person and property. Therefore, on Ferguson’s account, equality cannot serve as a principle of justice. Only the Principle of Security rightly

³¹⁵ Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 459.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 461.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 462.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 463.

prioritizes liberty and equality and explains why militias remain urgently necessary. The aim of the state should be to establish the conditions within which freedom can flourish, not force impossible ideals upon a resistant people. We will see later why Ferguson believes democracy cannot serve as a principle of freedom either. For now, it is enough simply to identify the vitality of militias in Ferguson's political theory. Militias ensure that society is defended and that the bluntest instrument of modern coercive power is decentralized. These passages from the *Principles* evince Ferguson's boundless support for the establishment of local militias from the beginning of his intellectual career to the end: "Liberty consists in the communication of safety to all," a communication achieved through the service of militias on the part of society.

As a matter of martial import, Ferguson's Principle of Defense and insistence on the establishment of militias as opposed to state maintenance of standing armies has direct relevance to the moral question of war-making itself. Ferguson makes use of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius' principles of just war to support his conviction that nations should take a natural posture of defense, not of aggression, in matters of international conflict.³²⁰ Conquest, the domination of another territory for reasons of interest, is not a sufficient condition for the declaration of war, and neither should war be waged on the supposition of fear or potential animosities. War is almost wholly reactive, "the success of arms cannot change wrong into right, and...any supposed right of conquest arising from the success of a war is a mere solecism in language and the reverse of any just tenet of natural law."³²¹ The political reality is that "nations are...almost in every instance mutual objects of jealousy and distrust, and must think themselves safe so far only as they are severely in condition to maintain their respective rights."³²² Yet modern nations, despite mutual jealousy and distrust, should use force only as a "last resort" aimed at "the redress of wrongs."³²³ Ferguson's Principle of Defense affirms the just war tradition's rebuke of aggressive

³²⁰ Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, trans. A. C. Campbell (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901). For Ferguson's interaction with Grotius see part II, chapter iv, section 4 of the *Principles*. Grotius' jurisprudence, according to Ferguson, is "so intermixed with quotations from the custom and practice of different ages, with considerations of duty as well as right, that his work becomes a system of ethics, and the history of opinions and customs, rather than a simple deduction and application of the principles of compulsory law" (295).

³²¹ Ferguson, *Principles*, 312.

³²² *Ibid.*, 294.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 305.

conquest. His points here and those above on the imperial tendencies of standing armies achieve even greater relevance in his direct critique of modern commercial society.³²⁴ By the end of my exposition of Ferguson's *Essay*, the political complications introduced to commercial exchange by martial expansion will have become clear.

Essay on the History of Civil Society

Bearing the subtleties of the militia issue in mind we are now in position to identify the broader logic of Ferguson's argument in the *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Society is the main character in his story and its journey down the corridor of commercial advancement constitutes the plotline. As we saw in chapter two, the history of civil society informs us of our contemporary circumstances by teaching us how to identify problems that have arisen before and respond sensibly to novel challenges. History is a sage. And in response to the commercial incongruities, complexities, and contradictions of modern society, history is Ferguson's preferred guide for exploring the boundaries and forms of commercial life.

Why have human beings always been found joined together in communities large and small? Given what we have discovered in Ferguson's Principle of Defense and theoretical tendencies of eighteenth-century political thought in general, we are likely unsurprised by his immediate appeal to self-preservation as a basic principle of social formation. Humans have always been found in companies and the cause of this assemblage is "the principle of their alliance or union."³²⁵ Human beings are social from beginning, for *it is not good for man to be alone* (Gen.2:18). On this principle of union Ferguson distinguishes crucially between self-love and self-interest.³²⁶

³²⁴ Roughly one hundred years later (1876) the British poet and artisan William Morris would object to the government's interest-driven rationale for war with Russia on precisely these grounds, insisting that purveyors of war would deliver its people "bound hand and foot forever to irresponsible capital." This quotation comes from 'To the Working Men of England,' an unpublished essay referred to but not included in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), 18.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

³²⁶ Examples that blur this distinction, if only taken from the Scottish school include: Francis Hutcheson, *On Human Nature*, ed. T. Mautner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Mackfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982); David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987).

Interest, we are told, “arises from the principles of self-preservation in the human frame, but is a corruption, or at least a partial result of those principles, and is upon many accounts very improperly termed *self-love*.”³²⁷ Identification of self-interest with self-love is a mistake because “love is an affection which carries the attention of the mind beyond itself, and has a quality which we call tenderness, that never can accompany the considerations of interest.”³²⁸ Confusing love with interest leads to deep ambiguities over the affective powers giving rise to political action as such. The idea of interest “commonly implies little more than our regard for property” and in turn complicates social cohesion. But because love is self-transcending by definition, Ferguson reckons it essential to the principle of self-preservation itself: that I am taken care of is a consequence of having loved others first, not accidentally loving others by caring chiefly for myself. “Mutual discoveries of generosity, joint trials of fortitude, redouble the ardors of friendship and kindle a flame in the human breast which the considerations of personal interest or safety *cannot* express.”³²⁹ United to this notion of love as self-transcendence, therefore, is the cooperative overcoming of adversity where people join together in the face of trial. “Affection operates with the greatest force where it meets with the greatest difficulties,” he states; a force illustrated vividly by the ancient Greeks and Romans, who understood how affections created and nourished bonds of union through allegiance to nation, land, and honor. The ancient citizen sets a striking contrast to the citizen of the modern state:

Let those examples be compared with the spirit which reigns in a commercial state, where men may be supposed to have experienced, in its full extent, the interest which individuals have in the preservation of their country. It is here indeed, if ever, that man is sometimes found a *detached* and a *solitary being*: he has found an object which sets him in *competition* with his fellow-creatures, and he deals with them as he does with his cattle and his soil, *for the sake of the profits they bring*. The mighty engine which we suppose to have formed society, only tends to set its members at variance, or to continue their intercourse after the bands of affection are broken.³³⁰

The duty of all society members is to protect and foster community. “No person is so far insignificant as not to be able, in some particular, to contribute to the welfare of

³²⁷ Ferguson, *Essay*, 18.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 (emphasis mine).

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

others.”³³¹ Notably absent from Ferguson’s account of society is any semblance of voluntarism. Membership in society is not premised upon voluntary consent, but by virtue of one’s natural birth, each being born into a community and thus given to that community on terms not of its own devising. “Man is by nature the member of a community, and when considered in this capacity the individual appears to be no longer made for himself.”³³² Birth is a blessing to the community, and with age the responsibilities to one’s community may fluctuate or shift but the fundamental duty to serve the needs of others never slackens.

Those who stand *for* the community, patriots for whom ministry to the fatherland is an enriching privilege, remain always tethered by the bonds of affection uniting brothers and neighbors. They belong together, and they belong where they are. This kind of existence, one dis-interested and directed toward the good of the community, is characterized by Ferguson as a Savage existence. He has in mind the native tribes of North America with their unpropertied and yet naturally stratified social order. The savage’s egalitarian occupations are simple: to contribute to the subsistence of the tribe and to help defend it as necessary—everyone occupies a definite role and place. The prospect of physical challenge is all that excites them. These savages enjoy an admirable existence without the idea or even desire to possess property. Throughout the *Essay*, Ferguson refers to savages, and later to barbarians, as a “rude” people. He means “rude” in the sense of “coarse” or “unrefined,” but where many of his contemporaries portray savages and barbarians in a mockingly primitive light, he uses them to illustrate how well a society can be ordered when property and wealth acquisition are not its dominant concerns. The irony with which he employs the savage as a literary tool will be seen more clearly later; for now, it is sufficient to note that the primitive political condition of the savage and barbarian is linked to their lack of property and indifference to wealth. For those members of modern society who do not view themselves as *for* the community, on the other hand, personal pursuits become detached and self-directed. Members of society addicted to self-interest quickly begin to treat others as useful to their aims; no longer are they the object of pursuit, but instead become the means to other less honorable ends.

³³¹ Ibid., 247.

³³² Ibid., 59.

According to Ferguson, civil society's historical narrative undergoes a revolutionary change with the introduction of private property. Savages and Barbarians either could not conceive of possessing land, or simply did not value it to the point of rampant accumulation. Their disinterestedness implies that "rude" peoples, because they did not hold property, "admit of no distinctions of rank or condition, and they have in fact no degree of subordination different from the distribution of function."³³³ Property possession inaugurates an alternative configuration to the political hierarchy. The power of property changes the essential criteria of authority, because "where no profit attends dominion, one party is as much averse to the trouble of perpetual command as the other is to the mortification of perpetual submission."³³⁴ In other words, political power is no longer natural, but artificial and coerced. Savages, like those of North America, are constituted by affections of equitable friendship and kindness, whereas the modern European it seems would "rather corrupt than improve the system of morality" by making repeated "demands for attention."³³⁵ The savages conceive of authority in terms of capacity; moderns in terms of possession. Characteristic of savages is a deep-seated contentment, disinterest in wealth, and commitment to testing fortitude. Political conditions for the savage seem always conducive to friendship. Indebtedness, the reality upon which modern commerce is founded, compromises genuine friendship by leveraging one neighbor against another and sinking the relationship into pure compensatory contract.

In addition to reshaping criteria of authority and fracturing bonds of friendship, the establishment of property can also oppose personal freedom and interest. The sight of another's acquisition initially motivates one to acquire property for oneself in fear that it might lead to serious deprivations. This sense of fear, coupled with jealousies arising later, urges members to amass their own resources and hoard them away. The change is one of perspective: from "what can I do to assist my neighbor?" to "how am I going to take care of myself?" The idea of private property made this transition possible. Something has come between my neighbor and me that requires close and constant attention, and which inverts the basic orientation of friendship. Next, "the individual having now a *separate interest*, the bands of society must

³³³ Ibid., 83.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid., 87.

become less firm and domestic disorders more frequent.”³³⁶ This is what we might call “step one” in the loosening of social cohesion. Property presents one with the fresh awareness that one has *interests* needful of protection and promotion, and once this process of acquisition has commenced it accelerates at astonishing speed. At some point in history this acceleration led even to the consecration of a monarch, who had allocated enough property to rule surrounding territories at will. According to Ferguson, the movement from mere possession of property to the consecration of monarchs illustrates how fortune establishes rank and social status: “when the distinctions of fortune and those of birth are conjoined,” society is almost permanently stratified; subordinates find their purpose in the glory of the monarch and are even “guided by his smiles and his frowns.”³³⁷ Possession of wealth and the political status accompanying it become customary and eventually gain legal support—tradition reinforces perception. At this juncture the concepts of property and interest converge to the confusion of both:

It is in this woeful condition that mankind, being slavish, interested, insidious, deceitful, and bloody, bear marks, if not of the least curable, surely of the most lamentable sort of *corruption*. Among them, war is the mere practice of rapine to enrich the individual; commerce is turned into a system of snares and impositions, and government turns oppressive or weak.³³⁸

Property and interest seem therefore to reinforce one another—property becomes an interest, and interest concentrates on property.

With Ferguson’s principle of subordination and protection of institutions in mind it would be useful at this juncture to pause and consider his theory of right and critique of ideal liberty. In a section entitled, “Of the Political Arts,” Ferguson elaborates how proper engagement in the political sphere might reasonably take place. Causes of disorder or injustice are not found in the legal or authorial parameters of the political institutions themselves, or the constitutional bases of society, but in “the collision of private interests and passions; or from the interfering of private with public concerns.”³³⁹ Frictions generated by competing interests test the ability of government to remedy disparate claims; at one moment it guards against abuses and

³³⁶ Ibid., 97 (emphasis mine).

³³⁷ Ibid., 99.

³³⁸ Ibid., 101.

³³⁹ Ferguson, *Principles*, 261.

the next it checks the proportion of its own abuses. The state is not privileged with omniscience or omnipotence. It must make do with what resources it has at the time. Thus, some form of political art is required to achieve enduring order. The question, of course, is what the *right* means might be, and in response Ferguson appeals to Grotian jurisprudence.³⁴⁰ The term *right* is defined as “the relation of a person to a thing in which no alteration ought to be made, without his own consent.”³⁴¹ Right is objective and expresses the qualitative relation between things. Violation of right is a *wrong*. And thus the task of every citizen “is not to give society existence,” Ferguson reiterates, “but to perfect the society in which he finds himself already by nature placed; not to establish subordination, but to correct the *abuse* of a subordination already established.”³⁴² Political arts are aimed, therefore, at the renewal of society through the righting of self-interested and divisive wrongs. One might even call the work *redemptive*: “society, in which alone the distinctions of right and wrong are exemplified, may be considered as the garden of God, in which the tree of knowledge of good and evil is planted; and in which men are destined to distinguish and to choose among its fruits.”³⁴³ But lest one be misled, individual liberty is right only in a particular, not absolute sense. Zealots of liberty have historically run into all varieties of disorder “and adventures under pretence of promoting it have found their way to the most violent and pernicious usurpations.”³⁴⁴ Exemplary evils of the French Revolution come to mind, and seeing as how the *Principles* were not published until 1792, perhaps it is one such “pernicious usurpation” Ferguson bears in mind. His philosophical approach to liberty is arrived at by way of negation, naming what liberty does *not* consist in. First, “liberty is not, as the origin of the name may seem to imply, an exemption from all restraint, but rather the most effectual application of every just restraint to all the members of a free state, whether they be magistrates or subjects.”³⁴⁵ Freedom must resonate with justice. Second, liberty cannot consist in equal station or fortune. Equality has not existed since the

³⁴⁰ For an excellent elucidation of Grotius’ theory of right see Oliver O’Donovan, “The Justice of Assignment and Subjective Rights in Grotius,” in *Bonds of Imperfection*, eds. Joan Lockwood and Oliver O’Donovan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 167-201.

³⁴¹ Ferguson, *Principles*, 185.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 457.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 458.

fall of man and regardless of whether one insists on an equality of possession or of capacity, both are misguided:

Nay, but we shall be told that all men were originally equal. This in regard to property can mean only that when no one had anything, all men were equally rich: But even this is no more than fancied equality in a single point. In respect to sex and age, strength of body and mind, individuals are destined to inequality from their birth; and almost in the first steps of society bear the distinctions which industry and courage give in the different attainments of men, and lead in the sequel to all the varieties of profession and fortune.³⁴⁶

Equality, as an ideal, can never be properly deployed or actualized and so therefore should never be made a political aim. Maintaining equality as a political aim would violate the only right every human being *does* hold equally—the right to defend oneself. If the state were to force an ideal of equality it would have to do so at the expense of the only equality society enjoys. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, liberty cannot consist in the prevalence of democratic power. “The violence of popular assemblies and their tumults need to be restrained no less than the passions and usurpations of any other power whatever; and there is indeed no species of tyranny under which individuals are less safe than under that of a majority or prevailing faction of a corrupted people.”³⁴⁷ A concert of wills is as susceptible to anarchy and tyranny as a solitary monarch, and thus democracy can neither furnish nor guarantee individual freedom. On the distant view, only attributive justice gives scope to genuine freedom.

In his *Essay*, Ferguson assesses the idea of freedom by comparing ancient (savage) notions with modern. In so doing he names two familiar powers that can either restrain or enhance freedom—property and law. Unbridled freedom tends almost universally to corruptions when left to itself. Law mitigates that tendency by establishing the terms of justice. “Where men enjoy peace,” he explains, “they owe it either to their mutual regards and affections, or the restraints of law.”³⁴⁸ The greatest threat to civil peace is “desire of lucre,” and that requires law have “a principle reference to property.”³⁴⁹ Strangely, however, the very laws meant to protect against violations of property may also instigate further violations, because “many of the

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 462.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 464.

³⁴⁸ Ferguson, *Essay*, 150.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

establishments which serve to defend the weak from oppression, contribute, by securing the possession of property, to favor its unequal division, and to increase the ascendant of those from whom the abuses of power may be feared.”³⁵⁰ All sorts of provisions have been envisaged to remedy the problem of unequal property possession but to little avail; revenue caps and abolition of primogeniture being among the more popular policies to date. Such regulations are hardly effective. He understands them to be more or less helpful to the sphere of commerce, but are proposed mainly in countries “whose national object is wealth.”³⁵¹ Distribution of productive property is crucial, he thinks, but never quite enough. Insatiable passions are the real problem. Regulation is “never perfectly attained in any state where the unequal division of property is admitted, and where fortune is allowed to bestow distinction and rank.”³⁵² Regulatory measures are at best coercive. Here the difference between the ancient and modern on regulating commerce is perhaps most stark. The ancient differs from the modern in that he gives little thought to “possessing” property, because (and Ferguson is behind this commitment wholeheartedly) the ancient “was made to consider himself as the property of his country, not as the owner of a private estate.”³⁵³ Genuine patriotism understands fully the permanence of land and concedes to its tangible authority, submitting humbly in recognition that the land possesses him, not he the land. In political arts every citizen should be a part of something larger than himself. But because the modern does not view property possession in the ancient way, we should expect blatant economic injustices to continue and for productive property to accumulate in fewer hands. Where the rule of law does not intervene, freedom is trampled underfoot.

Modern society is manifestly fixated with wealth and with the status attached to it. The reality of modernity is everyone’s enchantment with commercial gain. For Ferguson, the totalizing power of commerce, cajoling society into deep and irrevocable devotion to the ideals of profit and status, would have greatest impact on the institution of labor. In part four of the *Essay*, “Of Consequences that Result from the Advancement of Civil and Commercial Arts,” Ferguson is at pains to show how

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 151.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 152.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

commercial progress leads to the separation of professions and to the subsequent “subordination” these divisions establish. “The progress of commerce is but a continued subdivision of the mechanical arts,” he tells us, “every species of material is wrought up to the greatest perfection, and every commodity is produced in the greatest abundance.”³⁵⁴ Divisions of labor, in an unsavory irony, bring man and wealth together. But the effect of this division, apart from the plentiful result just described, is that laborers are made “like the parts of an engine, to concur to a purpose without any concert of their own.”³⁵⁵ Ferguson calls this line of work a “mechanical art,” since it requires “no capacity” and minimizes the human contribution. In fact, many mechanical arts “require no capacity” and “succeed best under a total suppression of sentiment and reason; and ignorance is the mother of industry as well as of superstition.”³⁵⁶ With this argument Ferguson levels what is perhaps the first recorded critique of the division of labor. Dividing and re-dividing the categories of labor refashions the laborer increasingly into a cog; functionally tasked, but devoid of meaning. He points out that manufacturing prospers most “where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may, without any great effort of imagination, be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men.”³⁵⁷ The mechanistic reduction of working man to an industrial function might even be described as *inhumane*, treating the worker not as a person, but as an object of productivity. If this were all Ferguson had to say on the subject our interest would remain piqued, but the division of labor is only the next perplexing phase in the story of commercial advancement.

Division of labor creates the necessary conditions from which the second phase of commercial advancement may proceed: the escalation of subordination. Two types of subordination, or disparities in authority, have already been identified in the *Essay*—natural disparities of talent and unequal divisions of property. Both imply vertical ordering and therefore strain the prospects of true equality. The third type of

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 173.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 174.

³⁵⁷ Ibid. Some recent social research has confirmed Ferguson’s claim. Researchers at MIT found that (all things being equal) monetary incentives successfully motivate routine mechanical labour, but that when applied to non-mechanical labour requiring any form of rational reflection these same incentives lead actually to *poorer* overall productivity. For a general summary of these case studies on incentivized performance see Daniel H. Pink, *Drive* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).

subordination arises from “the *habits* which are acquired by the practice of different arts.”³⁵⁸ Different occupations make differing contributions to civil society, some more visibly political than others. The work of the judge is a different contribution to that of the innkeeper; one definitively public, the other mainly private. Each offers a different civic service. Yet what strikes us most about this third subordination is Ferguson’s use of the word “habit.” Habits acquired from undertaking different occupations lead to further subordinations. Each worker’s occupation shapes him into something of the occupation’s own making. Occupational proficiency thus serves as a lever of stratification. Professions undertaken purely out of intellectual interest and which aim at perfection are considered highest order occupations, since the worker is not in any sense *bound* to a certain task. In short, an ideal day’s work will encourage freedom and creativity, remain non-necessitous by definition, and gravitate ever closer to its ideal. Not everyone is cut out for every variety of work; some prefer the labors of mind while others prefer the labors of hand, but both are needed for the preservation of society.

Equality, the antithesis of subordination, is treated by Ferguson with deep suspicion. The ideal of equality dislodges authority from its traditionally qualitative attribution and categorically levels it. The problem, in other words, is not simply that you and I have equal dignity in the eyes of God but that by nature you and I are equal citizens with equal competencies and contributions. Equality turns the verticality of authority horizontal. Excellence, which by definition seeks to surpass the status quo, brings to a political society in search of equality nothing but confusion. Forcing the ideal of equality politically creates tensions, for “if the pretensions to equal justice and freedom should terminate in rendering every class equally servile and mercenary, we make a nation of helots, and have no free citizens.”³⁵⁹ Freedom and equality are *adverse* to one another; the pursuit of freedom transgresses the rules of equality, and the pursuit of equality transgresses the rules of freedom.³⁶⁰ So, for example, if the state attempts to establish equality as constitutional principle, then it must do so at the expense of certain freedoms. The same goes for freedom, for if the

³⁵⁸ Ferguson, *Essay*, 175.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁶⁰ For a more contemporary and yet equally compelling treatment of this tension see chapter four of Yves R. Simon’s *The Philosophy of Democratic Government* (South Bend, University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

state seeks to maximize the freedoms of its citizens it must do so at the expense of citizens' claims to equality. In their ideal form, freedom and equality are primarily assessed by their prominence in the commercial sphere. However it is precisely here, in the commercial sphere, that "the exaltation of the few must depress the many," and freedom descends rapidly into slavery.³⁶¹ This arrangement is understood to be an injustice, one not easily remediable. That "the many" suffer at the expense of "the few" has been a long-recognized socio-economic injustice. Some theorists in Ferguson's day seem to have been persuaded that the "meanness" of lower classes arose primarily "from the defect of knowledge and of liberal education."³⁶² Late-moderns can therefore take comfort in the knowledge that an argument for educational correction of social deficiencies was a premonition very much alive as early as the mid eighteenth-century! The idea that certain ways of thinking and acting can be educated-out of a general population or that a lack of education is the primary reason for our social woes has been an alluring doctrine for quite some time, it turns out, and in the course of the eighteenth-century debate it was commonly believed education would elevate the lower class from its distasteful "meanness." In any event, the main point for our purposes is that the commercial state and the pursuit of equality are antithetical to the liberal state. So antithetical are they, in fact, that the primary objections to democracy itself—the most equalizing political form—are "taken from the inequalities which arise among men in the result of commercial arts."³⁶³ But not for reasons one might assume. For Ferguson, commercial enterprise negatively shapes political representatives. "How," he asks, "can he who has confined his views to his own subsistence or preservation be entrusted with the conduct of nations?"³⁶⁴ The commercial state might of necessity yield a hierarchical social order but the primary reason democracy cannot succeed in leveling society is because the magistrates cannot be trusted to represent justly their constituents. Elected magistrates being principle benefactors of a non-democratic commercial state leaves little room to hope for a parliament constituted entirely for public purposes.

³⁶¹ Ferguson, *Essay*, 177.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Commercial advancement therefore results in the division of labor and the necessary subordinations resulting from that division. This division and subsequent subordination signals an historical turning point. Latent in the consequences of commercial advancement are the first signs of national decline. But before the reasons for this decline can be articulated Ferguson needs first to show how national sentiments are formed and directed. Every nation thinks highly of itself and it seems patently evident that “no nation is so unfortunate as to think itself inferior to the rest of mankind: few are even willing to put up with the claim to equality.”³⁶⁵ If one nation sees itself as superior to another it does so according to prejudiced standards. The criteria used to compare qualitative differences between nations must be interrogated, for if the deciding criteria of national greatness are expanded to include achievements harmful to personal or institutional character, then final judgments on the comparative relationship will be fickle at best. “Even where we pretend to found our opinions on reason, and to justify our preference of one nation to another, we frequently bestow our esteem on circumstances which do not relate to national character, and which have little tendency to promote the welfare of mankind.”³⁶⁶ Conquest, territory, and wealth are insufficient criteria for determining the character of a nation. Some theorists will contend that wealth and national power are a natural fruits of public virtue, and that loss of these coveted national possessions is a direct result of vice. Prosperity, on this view, becomes a natural reward for being virtuous; poverty a natural punishment for vice. For Ferguson, however, it is clear that “the virtues of men have shone most during their struggles, not after the attainment of their ends.”³⁶⁷ Virtues display themselves when tried by conflict or resistance, like muscular exercise, and thus disclose the true quality of an action. The “ends” of wealth and national power are “frequently the causes of corruption and vice,” not the prize for virtuous actions.³⁶⁸ Pushing ever harder for ascendancy among nations—the natural result of what Hume called international “jealousies”—has brought each to the point of willfully substituting mechanical arts, which increase wealth, for those professions which might benefit the laborer.³⁶⁹ Identifying national greatness with

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 194.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 195.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 196.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

commercial wealth or prowess betrays the classical—and for that matter *biblical*—view of what it means to be great.

Humility, contentment, and peace are noble qualities that ultimately fail to deliver “commercial advantage” or “national ascendancy.” Rich and ascendant societies are “polished,” “civilized,” and modern; the unpolished savage and barbarian. Savages and barbarians are peoples who by definition never enjoy the refinements of wealth or national greatness. Nevertheless, both savage and barbarian societies view themselves as great and perhaps even comparably greater than surrounding peoples. Every nation sees itself as great. In asserting a position of prestige the self-declared “polished” society should be ashamed of its superciliousness. So called “polished” societies would do well to read their history, claims Ferguson, for history shows that “the progress of societies to what we call the heights of national greatness is not more natural than their *return* to weakness and obscurity is necessary and unavoidable.”³⁷⁰ The brutal truth about society is that it is comprised of mere mortals capable of great achievement as well as great failure; at different times both victim and benefactor of natural circumstance. Greatness is not an artificially engineered, contrived, or fabricated social status, but a quality only to be *conferred*, never demanded. It is perhaps at the exact moment when a society considers itself great that it has actually forsaken the constitutive properties of greatness. This is not to say, of course, that one should eliminate all aspirations whatsoever. As we have already seen, the essence of one’s life displays itself through exertion. But exertions can also be misdirected or misspent, as is clearly manifest in the pursuit of riches, where “men engage in pursuits with degrees of ardor not proportioned to the importance of their object.”³⁷¹ The moral question of what end our commercial endeavors seek is preceded by the question of whether the spirit of progress itself, “which for a time continues to carry on the project of civil and commercial arts, find(s) a natural *pause* in the termination of its own pursuits?”³⁷² The word “pause” stands out in that question almost as an absurdity. Pause? Is there ever a chance for progress to pause? Perhaps certain types of progress may allow or even encourage a noticeable pause, but *commercial* progress appears not to be one of these important types. Desire for riches grips the heart and penetrates the soul of

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 198.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 202.

³⁷² Ibid., 204.

every polished nation. The pursuit of wealth is, on Ferguson's account, the beginning of its own unmaking:

The commercial and lucrative arts may continue to prosper, but they gain an ascendant at the expense of other pursuits. The desire of profit stifles the love of perfection. Interest cools the imagination and hardens the heart; and, recommending employments in proportion as they are lucrative and certain in their gains, it drives ingenuity, and ambition itself to the counter and the workshop. But apart from these considerations, the separation of professions, while it seems to promise improvement of skill, and is actually the cause why the productions of every art become more perfect as commerce advances; yet in its termination and ultimate effects, serves in some measure to *break the bands of society*, to substitute form in place of ingenuity, and to withdraw individuals from the common scene of occupation on which the sentiments of the heart and the mind are most happily employed.³⁷³

Constant pursuit of interest, refining over and over again the apparatus of production, degrades and devalues the labors of society, breaking it apart and forcing it into ever more clandestine occupations. Love of “perfection” and “imagination” are substituted in deference to form and efficiency. This resignation to narrowly defined specializations leads to the common assumption that society is made to consist in parts, “of which none is animated with the spirit of society itself.”³⁷⁴ Such persons as are inattentive to the needs of state, Ferguson follows Pericles in calling “perfectly insignificant.”³⁷⁵ When each is after one's own private interest, public interest falls inevitably by the wayside. The state would do well to remain suspicious of this transition from public to private interest, because it may quickly find its citizens unworthy of the freedoms it protects. It must pay attention, in other words, to the uses being made of freedom. Liberty has its dangers, he reminds us, and people “may be found to grow tired in secret of a free constitution, of which they never cease to boast in their conversation and which they always neglect in their conduct.”³⁷⁶ Public needs are not the concern of Private Man, and this is why “national spirit,” that energetic push towards progressive ascendancy among nations, appears frequently transient—the “spirit” of privacy neglects and therefore corrupts the public sphere. Commercially oriented “national spirit” produces a relaxation in, and ignorance of,

³⁷³ Ibid., 206-7.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 207.

³⁷⁵ Ferguson quotes Pericles in part V, section 3 of the Essay but does not cite a text.

³⁷⁶ Ferguson, *Essay*, 212.

the public sphere. This is for Ferguson the third moment of society's transition toward slavery. "Ordinary establishments," he explains, "terminate in a relaxation of vigor and are ineffectual to the preservation of states, because they lead mankind to rely on their arts, instead of their virtues, and to mistake for an improvement of human nature a mere accession of accommodation or of riches."³⁷⁷ Taking his cue from the Scriptures, therefore, Ferguson seems content simply to affirm the truth from St. Paul's first letter to Timothy: *But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, in a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evil; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith, and pierced their hearts with many pangs* (1Tim.6:10).

Packaged covertly into this argument is Ferguson's militaristic conviction that every adult male citizen should serve in public defense. Pursuing avidly and perhaps unconscionably the social status resulting from wealth leads persons and communities into compromising apathy. "Men frequently, while they study to improve their fortunes, neglect themselves; and while they reason for their country, forget the considerations that most deserve attention." Thus, "a nation consisting of degenerate and cowardly men is weak," asserts Ferguson, and "a nation consisting of a vigorous, public-spirited, and resolute men is strong."³⁷⁸ Ferguson's weak-strong dichotomy harkens to antiquity, where the individual who seeks to increase riches and gain greater social prominence is seen as an "effeminate" and corrupted louse, cowardly, unable to possess himself or to wield a weapon. The "strong" citizen who serves the public and humbles himself dutifully on behalf of nation is seen as "heroic," a possessor of "masculine" virtues, a true patriot. Commercial interest divides the public from private and thus creates conditions for either a weak or strong citizenry. The constant danger is *prioritizing* commercial service to political service. Rigidly dividing professions into narrower fields of precise functionality also deprives citizens of the moral and intellectual resources needed for public service, for "to separate the arts which form the citizen and the statesman, the arts of policy and war, is an attempt to dismember the human character and to destroy those very arts we mean to improve."³⁷⁹ Ferguson describes this incredible division as a civil

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 213.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 218.

“deprivation.” Society is thus grouped into two types of citizens: one set has an interest in the preservation of civil establishments but lack the means to defend them, and the other has this power to defend but lacks either the inclination or the interest to do so.³⁸⁰ Such was the ancient Roman dilemma. It was not until legions became mercenary, fighting only for monetary compensation, that the conquests of Rome descended into banality. Of course, this insight, too, is directly relevant to Ferguson’s denouncement of standing armies and repeated appeal to establish local militias. Standing armies of a commercial state are at constant risk of being used as an instrument of commercial *interest*. Just as the mercenaries in Caesar’s legions fought for plunder, so too would modern nations fall prey to the lucre of conquest. Warfare couches the moral imperative deceitfully in terms of protecting or promoting interests—lines are constantly blurred, goods distorted, lives lost, and profits made. What was once a service to the public, at least by intention, is given over to each soldier or magistrate’s private interest; the publicity of the service masks the true commercial ambitions of the nation. Maintenance of such an army is but a massive “national waste.”

The last part of Ferguson’s *Essay* brings readers to the fourth step and to the argument’s climax. The character of nations remains the primary object of his inquiry, only now he shifts his attention to the final corruption incident to the loosening of social bonds and to that corruption’s admission of political slavery. Collective focus on the commercial state has settled into the fabric of society like an acid, breaking it apart and dissolving the affections that give it life:

When mere riches, or court favor, are supposed to constitute rank; the mind is misled from the consideration of qualities on which it ought to rely. Magnanimity, courage, and the love of mankind are sacrificed to avarice and vanity, or suppressed under a sense of dependence. The individual considers his community so far only as it can be rendered subservient to his personal advancement or profit: he states himself in competition with his fellow creatures; and, urged by the passions of emulation, of fear and jealousy, of envy and malice, he follows the maxims of an animal destined to preserve his separate existence, and to indulge his caprice or his appetite at the expense of his species.³⁸¹

Competition between private interest and public good is the contradictory starting-point of the modern commercial state. Citizens tend toward the former,

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 219.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 226.

unfortunately, and become either zealous to trespass on others in their rapacious pursuit of profit or willingly relinquish their political privileges for a baser, more servile existence. A people, as it were, split naturally into roles of either master or slave. The split is “natural” in that it results from a government which views itself principally as a protector and manager of commercial interests. From this management only two parties arise: “the oppressor who demands, and the oppressed who dare not refuse.”³⁸² The *idea* of Master and Slave does not seem to disturb Ferguson in the slightest; rather, what disturbs him is government turning a blind eye to obvious injustices:

Defects of government, and of law, may be in some case considered as a symptom of innocence and of virtue. But where power is already established, where the strong are unwilling to suffer restraint or the weak unable to find a protection, the defects of law are marks of the most *perfect corruption*.³⁸³

If the state proves incapable of remedying public injustices, then the moral corruptions of the commercial state have already entrenched themselves in the statutes of law and structures of government, corroding them from within.

The source of extravagant corruption and the hidden oracle of national declension is luxury. Ferguson defines it plainly as “that complicated apparatus which mankind devises for the ease and convenience of life.”³⁸⁴ A luxurious item in one place may not be luxurious in another, and a luxurious advantage in one generation may not be luxurious to the one succeeding it. Conceptions of luxury constantly change. Morally disconcerting to Ferguson, however, is the extreme *priority* given to luxuries. Whenever a luxurious object “may come to be preferred to friends, to a country, or to mankind” the corruptions of luxury can be seen to have left their mark. The moral force of luxury “is not to limit men to any particular species of lodging, diet, or clothes; but to prevent their considering these conveniences as the principle objects of human life.”³⁸⁵ Luxury is by definition a *privileged* possession identified purely by its exclusivity. If a sufficient number possess this “luxurious” object, then it ceases to be luxurious. The luxurious object, to put the matter another way, is one that only *some* people can obtain and when acquired by a sufficient number degrades into an

³⁸² Ibid., 229.

³⁸³ Ibid., 230.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 231.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 234.

object of mere convenience. In thinking about this niggling inequality one should bear in mind that the unequal distribution of wealth is a necessary product of an advancing commercial state. A certain level of inequality must be accepted in order to experience any degree of commercial improvement. Luxury is a class concept actualized by what the upper class flaunts and lower class envies. Politically this means that “luxury is...*adverse* to the form of democratic government; and in any state of society can be safely admitted in that degree only in which the members of the community are supposed of unequal rank and constitute public order by means of a regular subordination.”³⁸⁶ Notice the language Ferguson employs for this distinction—luxury and democracy are not only incompatible with one another, but altogether *adverse*. To the extent that democracy implies establishment of equality, or at least the pursuit of equality, luxury will menace the political order with abrupt and irresolvable inequalities. One can take one or the other, but cannot have both.

Moral corruption is the *prima causa* of institutional corruption. All people long for what they do not presently possess and think unreflectively of felicity consisting in much the way Hobbes describes: “a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but way to the latter.”³⁸⁷ Regardless of status, whether abiding in cave or palace, everyone longs for sensual gratification in an object not presently held. Luxury—that object of near-universal longing—is a false mirage on the personal and social horizon. When it becomes an object of pursuit, exertive actions have nowhere to go but back upon the actor, amassing upon himself. Ferguson suggests that when left to follow their own private advantages, each will become “effeminate,” “mercenary,” and “sensual.” Yet each will become so not because pleasures and profits have become alluring, “but because he has fewer calls to attend to other objects; and because he has more encouragement to study his personal advantages and pursue his separate interest.”³⁸⁸ Andrew Fletcher, too, had foreseen this danger. Luxury affords some the *choice* of whether to submit to military service or pay the poor to do so for him; “an expensive way of living” that allows the rich to sell the means of freedom and amuse themselves endlessly with private commercial tokens. A luxury of *not*-serving martially would

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 235.

³⁸⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. R. Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 70.

³⁸⁸ Ferguson, *Essay*, 237.

seem then to widen the divide between public and private.³⁸⁹ Self-interested and isolated individuals lose the ability to think and act in service to the public. When this tendency becomes a sufficiently widespread national phenomenon, fortune and luxury absorb public attention:

Nations are most exposed to corruption from this quarter, when the mechanical arts, being greatly advanced, furnish numberless articles to be applied in ornament to the person, in furniture, entertainment, or equipage; when such articles as the rich alone can procure are admired; and when consideration, precedence, and rank are accordingly made to depend on fortune.³⁹⁰

The quality of “goodness”—the ground of political life—is dissolved into mere appearances. Merit and ability become politically superfluous. Within such a society “we rate our fellow-citizens by the *figure* they are able to make,” and the highest of our praise is reserved for what seems richest in ostentation. Modern commercial society has thus “transferred the idea of perfection from the character to the equipage; and that excellence itself is, in our esteem, a mere pageant, adorned at a great expense by the labors of many workmen.”³⁹¹ Ferguson identifies here the workings of an informal bondage. A rich master uses commoners for commercial and political gain, and the commoners willingly permit their enslavement to “so great” a master. Stocks have hereby snapped shut around the wrists of a nation, but not yet been securely locked.

For the corruption of society to achieve completeness, as Fletcher had foreshadowed, the luxurious bent of commercial society must be aided concomitantly by the mass forsaking of public service. The day is coming when private interests effectively distract citizens from public affairs and bring them to focus entirely upon their set of independent personal domains. Those public affairs demanding attention will be discerned as inconveniences or interruptions to the normal pace of personal enterprise. Under such conditions “the care of mere fortune is supposed to constitute wisdom; retirement from public affairs and real indifference to mankind receive the applauses of moderation and virtue.”³⁹² Political life reduces to a series of petty

³⁸⁹ See Fletcher’s “A Discourse on Government with Relation to Militias” and chapter thirteen of Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*, 423–461.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 243.

disputes over issues of minor commercial interest. The higher orders of society claim here a particularly cumbersome experience when, in truth:

They speak of human pursuits as if the whole difficulty were to find something to do: They fix on some frivolous occupation as if there was nothing that deserved to be done: They consider what tends to the good of their fellow creatures as a disadvantage to themselves: They fly from every scene in which any efforts of vigor are required, or in which they might be allured to perform any service to their country.³⁹³

Who then is truly pitiable? It is surely not the poor that deserve our pity, insists Ferguson angrily, it is much more justly given to the rich! In their lavish inactivity they waste away on new indulgences and fresh sensualities all the while unimpressed by concerns of others. The political situation is therefore dismal.

Portrayed thusly the modern commercial state can only end in political slavery. This slavery is two tiered: slavery within the society itself, where the upper class rules the lower by virtue of fortune and status, and slavery between nations. The latter form is foreshadowed randomly throughout earlier parts of the *Essay* and is only made explicit at the argument's climax. National slavery occurs when fortune ceases to be an instrument for good and becomes instead the *idol* of a slackened and sickened public conscience. Fortune, "the foundation on which freedom was built, may serve to support a *tyranny*; and what in one age raised the pretensions and fostered the confidence of the subject may in another incline him to servility, and furnish the price to be paid for his prostitutions."³⁹⁴ Wealth preliminarily enhances freedom but when admired "leads to *despotical government*."³⁹⁵ Riches become so singularly exalted that law itself is impaled on the sword of interest, concealing rather than restraining the "iniquities of power." Law is the soil that gives life to genuine liberty, but if the soil is disparaged and the roots of freedom destroyed, then each must be willing to vindicate his own freedom for himself. Under a private commercial state, therefore, "even political establishments...cannot be relied on for the preservation of freedom."³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Ibid., 246.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 248.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 251.

Ferguson realizes that in the long run, higher orders of society will begin to revere one another in much the same way the lower order of society reveres the higher. Each will be prepared to do whatever it takes to ascend the social ladder, especially if all it requires is pretend (or real) admiration of those who stand in position to benefit. The whole socio-political structure is interest driven. So long as one's money-making capacities remain unimpeded it does not matter whether wealth is becoming increasingly isolated in a few or whether a solitary individual has control of the political sword. Here we see the undercurrent of Ferguson's argument come full circle—he is mindful of militias and the establishment of a standing army at the disposal of Westminster. When the division between public and private is formally established, separating civilian and public professions, the way is prepared for a “dangerous alliance of faction with military power.”³⁹⁷ Soon *conquest* becomes a political end in itself; and as it was for ancient Rome, so it will be in modern Britain:

In proportion as territory is extended, its parts lose their relative importance to the whole. Its inhabitants cease to perceive their connection with the state, and are seldom united in the execution of any national, or even factious, designs. Distance from the seats of administration, and indifference to the persons who contend for preferment, teach the majority to consider themselves as the subjects of a sovereignty, not as the members of a political body.³⁹⁸

Conquest reinforces the perception of dissociation. Of all the consequences tendered by the modern commercial state it is “perpetual enlargement of territory” which leads most easily to despotism. Even the government in a political situation of complete commercialization and national servitude takes a view to its own fiscal interests, where it becomes (like its subjects) devoted to the protection and promotion of its *own* commercial interests. The irony, as illustrated vividly by the history of civil society, is that to conquer and to be conquered often appears the same, sharing the same ultimate conclusion. Slavery is the political, social, and personal outcome of the commercial state. Each citizen is either enslaved to his own desires, to the empowered elites of his community, or to the despotic ruler of state: “Obedience is the only duty that remains, and this is exacted by force.”³⁹⁹ Enslavement is integral to the tragic narrative of commercial society, reaching its historical climax with a

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 256.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 259.

conquest that is always also its anticlimax. For although conquest might appear the apex of political power, it is in fact the genesis of impotence and enslavement; speaking not of power, but of uncertainty; expressing nothing of contentment or peace, but of ambition, greed, and capriciousness.

Institutions, Democracy, and Slavery

Ferguson's history of civil society understands the moral and political compromises inherent to commercial enterprise. Posing ancient Greek and Roman societies as examples, he seeks to show how a distinctly modern understanding of commercial interest creates both moral and political contradictions. Societies in pursuit of wealth become submissive to the point of defenseless, and when unable or unwilling to preserve their own domestic order such societies are easily dominated by a foreign power. The "despotic tyrant" Ferguson has in mind resembles the commander of a national standing army, like King Louis XV for example, or allied conquerors from Austria or Spain. The commercial society is affectively incapacitated. This is what he means when he says that fortune may come to support a tyrant—the very object of pursuit becomes the catalyst for political domination.

He does not appear to have noticed it himself, but inherent to the logic of Ferguson's argument is the crucial premise that *the pursuit of wealth in commercial enterprise undermines political institutions*. He has in mind a uniquely military despot who marches without resistance into a territory and captures all political authority. Having expended all its energies in the pursuit of commercial gain, the rich nation has forfeited its ability to make war and thus succumbs to the power of a nation that can. As late-moderns standing centuries removed we must resist the urge to discount Ferguson's argument as primitively naïve. Surmising impulsively that his situation was so very different from our own or that questions faced in eighteenth-century Britain could not possibly correspond to political questions of the early twenty-first century are equally naïve. *Are* they so different? Do we not detect something poignant and applicable in Ferguson's historical assessment of commercial society? What Ferguson could not have seen when modern capitalism was but a sapling in the great forest of political history was how and to what degree

that sapling would mature and eventually seed itself across the globe. He could see that the progress of democratic capitalism gradually undermines political institutions, as was already patently evident in the dispassionate view of military service among social elites, but we have in our time seen his claim come true in an altogether different way.

In our age, we have seen the *market itself* become the tyrant. If one might be permitted this personification—and there is little reason for disallowing it, seeing as the commonest references to “the market” are in regard to its “habits,” “moods,” and “reactions”—then it seems relatively clear that the market can, in fact, *tyrannize*. Capital market tyranny asserts itself cruelly without political or legal repercussion. On a political level, the commercial sphere appears at times to be both constructive and destructive; it replenishes tax revenues for the building of infrastructure, for instance, while at the same time bringing productive property into the hands of a shrinking number of benefactors. Moral and political inconsistencies within health care, or campaign finance, or climate change, or investment banking, for example, emerge as each distinct market tends to extremes when configured by capitalist logic: the commodification of health, buying of votes, opposition to reform, and reimbursement of stock gamblers. Political institutions are therefore either intrinsically broken or simply prone to commercial domination. Ferguson, for his part, had already perceived this tendency in the history of society—political society naturally accommodates the market will, although the market’s demand for political attention is not itself a brand of tyranny. The market becomes genuinely tyrannical only when it destroys or forsakes the very political institutions meant to govern it, stampeding them underfoot as a violent herd shatters its picket corral.

To late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century theorists who would view the dawning of liberal capitalism as the initial victory of democracy over monarchy as a political form, Ferguson has already rejoined with at least two reasons why this usurpation would not be successful. First, when wealth is made the principle object of commercial exchange this leads to a twofold slavery—between possessors and dispossessed, and also between nations. Slavery is total. If one were not enslaved to riches itself, then one would be enslaved to another who would; if one society were to become intoxicated by the pleasures of riches, then it would be quickly enslaved by another society virtuous enough to resist the same temptation. Slavery is total because greed appears helplessly pervasive; made possible by way of a simple

idea that has gradually bewitched the modern world: *Luxury*. Luxury, as we have seen, relies for its existence on class divisions because it is defined by an enjoyment premised on exclusivity. When a luxury becomes the possession of enough non-elites, then the object or service no longer remains a luxury but becomes instead a mere convenience. Luxury therefore abolishes equality. In a free market directed toward the multiplication of wealth equality becomes impossible precisely because wealth by its very existence drives a wedge between those who possess the means of productive property and those who do not.⁴⁰⁰ How then, Ferguson asks us, can a legitimate democratic government be established upon such conditions? When the object of commercial exchange leads to deeper inequalities why should anyone expect democratic processes to endure?

In supposed popular governments such as exist in representative democracies of the early twenty-first century, political power is not—contrary to popular opinion—held by that collection of individuals comprising the majority, but by those who possess the greatest monetary resources, who, in order to command political control must first be market beneficiaries *prior* to becoming political magistrates. This problem offers two revelations. The first is the patently obvious reality of representatives being faced with a conflict-of-interest between economic gains and political service. Who are they to support, for example, when a piece of legislation creates tension between the interests of a party-supporting multinational corporation and those of the wider electorate? Whose needs are being represented? This dilemma is a timeless political reality. Constituents cannot control whom or to what their magistrates will lend support. Second, and perhaps the more important revelation, is a profound blindness to forces giving rise to political power as such. Elections are won these days by the savvy and solvent, meaning candidates must be wealthy in order to gain political appointment. Political authority of the democratic variety, it turns out, comes with a price. Nevertheless, when it is finally recognized that possession of wealth gives rise to political power the undermining of political institutions by the Market has finally become complete, for when wealth becomes the primary means to political power the object of societal corruption has itself become *institutionalized*.

⁴⁰⁰ For a useful historical overview of luxury as a concept, see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

If slavery is an institution—not “slavery” in the modern sense of physical and psychological cruelty, but in the ancient sense of *servus*, or service—and commercial order is defined by the relationships humans share with one another in the exchange of wares, then it means a great deal that Ferguson joins a host of early-modern theorists in referring to physical exchanges as “commerce,” drawing as it does from the Latin tradition of “coming together” to exchange merchandise. The marketplace was not yet an abstraction, but a collection of real people coming together to trade tangible objects. On these terms Locke was correct in suggesting a deep link between the vitality of commerce and the labours that go into it; labour and land are indeed partners in the genesis of commerce. But if labour is always a necessary part of commerce this means everyone must render service to someone: masters serve slaves, as it were, and slaves serve their masters. “Everyone is a slave to someone” would seem to be an essential human aphorism that on the commercial level smacks of universal truth.⁴⁰¹ The fundamental composition of society is premised on the tacit offering and acceptance of service. Yet, at the same time, we realize that despite the master’s service to the slave there is a distinguishable “slave class” in society, a larger proportion of slaves who labour on behalf of a smaller proportion of masters. Marx, of course, found this to be the Injustice of all injustices. But what we have seen in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a further impoverishment of this relationship. If it is true that slavery is an institution, as I have maintained, what distinguishes the late-modern slave from the ancient is the modern’s tragic loss of *service*. The chasm between the ancient and modern slave is therefore one of both time and dignity, since it seems there is no denying the late-modern slave now has little knowledge of *who*, exactly, his master is, and if that were not enough, the work assigned to him is even *less* meaningful. Modern slave-labour is normally dedicated to corporate multinationals owned by masters without faces or names; it is from the slave’s perspective service only to an idea or possibility. The labours undertaken, moreover, are often fragmented the moment they are completed, circulated numerically to different departments and then tallied as a percentage in stock value. On rare occasion these slaves are offered stock options affording them limited “ownership” in the business their efforts serve, collectable by

⁴⁰¹ For all its historical fascination, on this point Hilaire Belloc came up short. The capitalist and the collectivist were moral menaces to modern society, to be sure, but their theoretical tendency to a “servile state” misjudges the historical fact that slavery is a permanent human fixture, not simply a recurring adjustment. See *The Servile State*, (London: Constable and Co., 1948).

instalments upon retirement. Still, the fact remains that the slave is required daily to continue button-clicking and data-plugging without the slightest prospect of imagination, service, or sense of purpose. Contemporary conditions of slave labour would seem comparably worse than the ancient's. Deprived of soul, slavery defined affectively by service is emptied of content, unmaking itself as the *object* or purpose of service becomes increasingly obscured.

Conclusion

The principle aim of this chapter has been to outline the argument of Ferguson's *Essay*, underscore its central argument, and sketch a few of its implications for modern society. We observed first the nature of Ferguson's militarism and the vital role it plays in his advocacy for local militias, which turned out to be equally concerned with the government's attempt to establish a standing army. Next, with militarism in mind, we turned our attention to the argument of Ferguson's *Essay*. The contours of this argument covered a wide-ranging conceptual terrain, including the state of nature, the union of societies, establishment of private property, the principles of authority, power of labour, the loosening of social bonds, and lastly, the movement toward political slavery. Ferguson's conclusion seems to have been that the society pursuant commercial gain as its principle object will become weak and susceptible to domination and enslavement. He is concerned, in other words, with what riches *do* to people and the political ramifications incurred. Commerce aimed at multiplying wealth undermines political institutions—that is the crux of Ferguson's argument. It was this political principle, aided by the fortunate position of being over two centuries removed that allowed us to make a contemporary application. My claim has been that the liberalized market bent on the pursuit of wealth has undermined our political institutions to such an extent that it seems now in its highly abstract and personified form to have itself become the tyrant Ferguson feared. Then, lastly, we reviewed two points alluded to briefly by Ferguson but that were left largely untouched until we articulated the argument concerning market tyranny. These were, first, that the modern market economy is adverse to democratic government. This adversity endures because of luxury, which drives a wedge into society, creating tensions and conflicts that disintegrate the political order. Luxury is premised on inequality and so long as luxury remains part of capitalism's project the social equality required for genuine democratic order will never be reached. And this

is precisely why, despite the murderous efforts of the French, history has never seen a pure democratic government. The other implication Ferguson's argument raised was the problem of late-modern slavery. Differentiating from the ancient meaning of "slavery" associated "service," the aim was to show why slavery remains a permanent human institution and how the banality of late-modern slavery abolishes the conditions that make slavery meaningful.

We are provided a partial vision of civilization's real institutions. In a world comprised of errant human beings even the mightiest establishments are prone to crimes of ruin. Those noble authorities designated to protect us from ourselves cannot forever withstand the belligerent corruptions repeatedly hoist upon them. Ferguson was correct in seeing slavery at the heart of commercial and political life. In each sphere we find items to bind and possess, like people or land, just as we also find items that bind us, like law and families. Freedom, the great bastion of liberalism, is eternally relegated to the realm of ideas, never to be concretely actualized in its fullest expression. Until the coming of the Kingdom, that is, when judgment of freedom releases it from the darkness concealing its glory. Until that judgment humanity must live with the institutions it has been given, *and be subject to the governing authorities* (Rom.13:1).

Chapter 5

Ferguson's Universe

The aim of this chapter is to better define the Christian character of Adam Ferguson's moral and political thought by making what has remained heretofore implicit, explicit. Bearing in mind that we are not dealing with a systematic theologian but a Christian philosopher, this essay will attempt to name moral and political theories *against* which Ferguson is most resistant and critical. Clarifying what he conceptually or practically opposes will share the benefit of highlighting what he positively favors as an alternative, his moral and political concerns being directed primarily at what seem to him perversions of Christian morality and politics. Opposition to what I describe as three modern idealistic threats—determinacy, universality and romanticism—will prop the canvas of this moral and political sketch. Precisely what is meant by each of these ideals will be treated extensively below, so I provide here only a few preliminary definitions. By “determinacy” I mean (generally) the necessary and uninterrupted forces of material cause and effect. “Universality” will refer to the human comprehension of reality and the application of universal principles to everyday existence as complete and totalizing. The type of “romanticism” referred to in what follows is more accurately the romantic seeds of freedom, sentiment, and novelty—overcoming of *telos* and custom in history—buried in fertile soils of the mid to late eighteenth-century. Preliminary definitions carry certain limits, of course, so more flesh will need to be added to these skeletal definitions as the essay proceeds.

For determinacy, a brief rehearsal of early modern natural law theory discussed intermittently throughout chapters two through four will furnish a starting point for outlining Ferguson's response to the theory's metaphysical implications. His critique of mechanistic natural law will also have direct relevance for our questions concerning commercial order. Similarly, for universality, the brand of determinacy emblazoned into modern imaginations sparked new optimism over what the mind is capable of comprehending. Determinacy helped established the conditions on which universality could kindle and enflame. Accounting for how this came about will be

an important goal in treating this second threat, as will its bearing on the overarching commercial question. Lastly, for romanticism, after we have noted the ways in which Ferguson is and is not a romantic, the inquiry will shift focus from Ferguson himself to the critiques he levels on two modern impulses: the sanctification of feeling and devotion to political novelty. Each of the threats has arisen before, in chapters two through four (history, action, and political institutions), only now the aim is to bring further unity to Ferguson's complaints. If successful this will have the effect of synthesizing his thought and specifying how it responds to eighteenth-century debates. At the conclusion of this chapter, despite not having captured a thoroughgoing theological project, it will remain possible to point toward certain theological commitments and in so doing offer a few examples why Ferguson's thought is relevant to contemporary Christian ethics.

Determinacy

The observation that Newtonian physics offered the eighteenth-century world a reinterpretation of natural law has become common to the point of axiomatic.⁴⁰² Prior to Newton, the story goes, natural law remained an expression of divine reason or will (depending on one's view) and treated most intelligibly as a metaphysical subject; "good," "truth," and "right," for example, being terms intrinsically transcendent yet imposing immanently binding powers behind the natural law. Law was considered 'natural' in the sense that it corresponded essentially with the way things seemed to go in the natural world, describing nature while not being contingent upon it. Early in the seventeenth-century and several decades prior to the publication of Newton's *Principia*, Hugo Grotius described the Law of Nature as so

⁴⁰² The evidence of Newton's theoretical persuasiveness can be glimpsed as early as Locke and gains supportive momentum throughout the eighteenth-century, especially in the Scottish Enlightenment, reaching its forceful climax in Kant. Gradual realization in the latter part of the eighteenth-century that Leibniz had stumbled onto similar mathematical findings independently only further reinforced the explanatory prowess of Newtonian mechanics. As David Hume would testify, if Newton's theory could overcome the scrutiny of continental theorists, which by the mid eighteenth-century seemed to have already been achieved, "it will probably go down triumphant to the latest posterity." Adam Smith would have even fewer reservations. Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, (London : William Dawson & Sons, 1954); G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, R. Ariew and D. Garber eds. and trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989); John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987)), 121; Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. I. S. Ross (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 91-105; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, P. Guyer and A. W. Wood eds. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

unalterable “that it cannot be changed even by God himself.”⁴⁰³ The law of nature is permitted to authorize as it does because were God to change or alter his Law it would lead to contradictions implicating divine character. The Creator is a God of order, not of disorder. Passages from Genesis 18, Isaiah 25, and Romans 2 further establish this point, for God himself “suffers his actions to be judged by this rule.”⁴⁰⁴ But surely there exists some contingency or flexibility in the Law of Nature. Must everything be so rigidly prescribed? No, and Grotius says as much when he contends that “in reality there is no change in the unalterable law of nature, but *only in the things appointed by it*, and which are liable to variation.”⁴⁰⁵ The law of nature is therefore conceived as an authority, not as a uniform determinate of what does and does not occur or what shall or shall not be performed; it sets parameters to the possible—where an action is performed and how far it might be carried out, for example—but cannot control the action undertaken. This is why, explains Grotius, “things are allowed by the law of nature, not absolutely, but according to a certain state of affairs.”⁴⁰⁶ Unalterable as it may be, then, the law of nature is at once resolute and permeable, generic and particular, liberating and restrictive. Specific states of affairs, which for Grotius are governed by the Law of Nations, illustrate perfectly how the law of nature authorizes jurisprudence that avoids universal codifications best formulated contextually according to an actual state. Before a law can be considered binding it must first be considered right or truthful, a “dictate of right reason showing the moral turpitude or moral necessity of any act from its original agreement or disagreement with a rational nature.”⁴⁰⁷ But that is not all. Not only must an act agree or disagree with the right, each act “is either forbidden or commanded by God, the author of nature.”⁴⁰⁸ Thus, for Grotius, the law of nature derives its authority from natural right, which is itself an expression of God’s authority as author of nature.

⁴⁰³ Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, trans. A. C. Campbell (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), book I, chapter 1, section x.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid (emphasis mine).

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. By “moral necessity” Grotius means simply that “the laws of nature must always bind us.”

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

Grotius' differentiation between what the natural law *commands* and what the natural law *determines* is in the latter part of the seventeenth-century, particularly after publication of Newton's *Principia*, blended into new philosophic formulae. Accounting for this change, one possible explanation is that natural law became theoretically identified with laws of physics, and indeed Newton claimed in his Preface to have "cultivated mathematics so far as it regards philosophy."⁴⁰⁹ This mathematical study of nature and its laws fundamentally altered the way natural law was understood. Language of mechanism came to replace the organic unity of the natural law seen in its parts and whole, in its universality and particularity, in its transcendence and its immanence. Focus was brought most resolutely to the perfections of creation, where God sent forth the world with such order, both in reality and in human reason, that powers generating and sustaining this order could be both identified and comprehensively described. From this newly erected rational platform humanity could scrutinize all the principles, rules, and forces establishing existence. Newton's mathematical vision subsequently relegated the unseen powers of the world to descriptive analysis of cause and effect: such-and-such a phenomenon is explained by formula 'X,' and so therefore the variables of formula 'X' identify both the cause and rationale of the phenomenon under consideration. Determinacy and necessity were thus embedded within the very texture of the natural law.

Philosophers were coming to terms with the implications of Newton's mechanistic world picture as late as the mid eighteenth-century, ruminating once again over the perennial opposition between necessity and freedom. Laws of nature impose determinacy on reality by categorically disallowing states of affairs to be in any way other than they are, the present being simply the effect of a seemingly infinite chain of prior causes. This raises the obvious question of whether there is any room for contingency, spontaneity, newness, creativity, or basic human liberty. Hume famously rekindled Scottish fascination with this seasoned dilemma on Newtonian terms. Both in his *Treatise on Human Nature* and later in the *Enquiries*, he maintains that while matter is always uniformly determined by cause and effect relationships, human beings remain susceptible to the determinates of nature because "man is everywhere the same" and "we acknowledge a uniformity in human motives

⁴⁰⁹ Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, Robert Thorp trans. (London: 1777), see first sentence of Preface.

and actions as well as in the operations of the body.”⁴¹⁰ Each person’s will is directed by passions that animate it. Interpreting and understanding human action requires of it certain degrees of uniformity and regularity. Predictability helps ensure rational consistency. Every will has some passion or motivation behind it rendering the effects of some prior cause. “Liberty,” quips Hume, is not entirely unlike “chance, which is universally allowed to have no existence.”⁴¹¹ He thus employs descriptions of material cause and effect to rebut metaphysical freedom. From here he applies determinacy to other academic subjects, like history and political economy, and allows for material mechanisms to describe metaphorically how each is configured around certain causal relationships. Add to this the determinist leanings of other eighteenth-century theorists and one sees that the spirit of the age tended strongly to support physical determinacy.

Ferguson’s resistance to this spirit of determinacy takes several trajectories. We saw in chapter three that the best way to describe his account of freedom is dialectical: freedom is best expressed in rightful limitations and rightful limitations are best expressed in freedom, belonging to one another as each makes the other intelligible to itself. Unbounded freedom is not unlike the irrational thought of playing football without sidelines or field judges, or of a swim meet without starting guns or lane assignments—actions require a defined place and convention for performing *something* rather than *anything*. On the social plane, “limitations” refer to physical and political laws establishing concrete human domains; “limitations” referred to in the eighteenth-century as natural laws. For Ferguson, the jurisdiction of natural law (understood in the Grotian sense) sets the parameters within which every state of affairs cogently obtains but underdetermines what must or must not be the case in every such state of affairs. The law’s scope is decided by the general contours of nature and, most importantly, by nature’s Author. Nature is a *creature*, after all, and as a creature it expresses something about the character of its Artificer. “All of nature is connected,” Ferguson explains, “and the world itself consists of parts, which like the stones of an arch, mutually support and are supported.”⁴¹² This order

⁴¹⁰ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 83-84. See also *Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 399-422.

⁴¹¹ Hume, *Enquiries*, 96.

⁴¹² Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 18.

of nature “consists in movements” that counteract, disturb, regulate, and balance one another; appearing to humankind as though nature repeatedly oscillates between being at peace with itself, and being at war. Yet “what seems to be irregular is the perfection of order,” so any disturbance introduced to this oscillation is but part of nature’s exquisite form. Nature has an integrity; an internal coherence. If one wishes to say it is governed by “laws” that would be fine with Ferguson, so long as the description did not eradicate human meaning or violate the character of the Author.

Early sections of the *Principles* argue repeatedly that although not everything is within one’s freedom to choose, each nevertheless has distinguishable options before him from which to decide. So, for example, although one cannot choose which society one is born into, one may afterward choose who one shall make friends with or keep as company. What sets man apart from other animals is that he possesses a mind “intimately conscious of itself, as it exists in thought, discernment, and will.”⁴¹³ In section thirteen of chapter II of the *Principles*, Ferguson criticizes determinacy by arguing positively for the metaphysical reality of freedom. Freedom is implicitly acknowledged in the fact that each is *conscious* of his freedom. If one is conscious of one’s freedom, believing it to be the case that one’s actions bear the mark of contingency is evidence for being free in reality. Putting even greater distance between himself and Hume, he asserts that “effect is correlative to cause, and they are inseparable, but there may be existence without any cause external to itself, as there may be will without any cause but the mind that is willing.”⁴¹⁴ The mind, not the passions, energizes and directs the will; it is “the cause of its own determination.” Therefore “it is absurd,” as he sharpens the rhetoric of his refutation, “to consider volition as an act of necessity, not of choice.”⁴¹⁵ Philosophical clarity on this question was made opaque by the employment of “mechanical imagery” to describe how existence formally operates. In point of fact, will is by definition the “direction of mind” and therefore allows only such determinacy as might allow for meaningful expressions of human freedom. “Discernment and freedom are essential to intelligent beings.”⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Ibid., 48.

⁴¹⁴ Ferguson, *Principles*, 153

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

“Mechanical imagery” has also been misapplied to divine providence. “The consideration that infinite power must have preordained the operations of will, and that these operations therefore cannot be free, is an argument taken from a collateral subject,” says Ferguson; an idea which would seem to undermine the fact that we are conscious of freedom. By “collateral subject” he means (presumably) that of divine omniscience. Human beings cannot know with any certainty what divine omniscience is like or to what it ultimately extends. We *do* have a notion of our own freedom, however, and this seems more reliable of the pair. This is not to say that the knowledge of God is somehow limited, for it includes “whatever may result from the source of contingency” and “his almighty providence is sufficient to control the effects of such freedom.”⁴¹⁷ Ferguson’s proposal departs slightly from Augustinian compatibility of divine foreordination and human freedom in its suggestion that necessities of divine foreknowledge would still be perfect even if that knowledge allowed for certain “contingencies.” God sees in the “eternal Now” but our consciousness of freedom must imply that we are not self-deceived. Freedom must therefore exist as a provision in foreknowledge itself. Were we not free, how could humanity be held responsible for its actions? Determinism dissolves any form of moral or legal culpability into meretricious innocence. The same problem of culpability arises in instances where motive and will are causally identified; if passions empower will, then those passions motivating the will become the objects of blame, not the action or actor. On this Aristotelian view one can always declare after committing a wrongful act “I’m not yet the kind of person who can avoid X or positively perform Y” and escape guilt. Motive determines will to the erasure of fault. “How absurd,” remarks an annoyed Ferguson, “for the fatalist to plead that he is not accountable for having committed a bad action under pretense that his intention itself, which was the motive or cause of such action, was bad!”⁴¹⁸ Therefore neither humanity nor the reality it inhabits is wholly determined by material causes or divine foreknowledge.

Resisting the determinacy latent in “mechanical imagery” Ferguson posits a God of wisdom whose will is not exhausted or comprehended by the laws of nature. Human action contains a surplus of meaning that once performed discharges a

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 155.

multitude of consequences uncontrollably into the world that often “discover a meaning as an effect discovers a cause.”⁴¹⁹ All action emerging from divine government is ripe with significance and power. If semblances of ingenuity or innovation are detected in any human accomplishment “the wisdom of God,” not the person or species, is to be credited.⁴²⁰ God is envisaged as coming alongside the mind, supplying it with virtues and needed insight. So, human action upheld by divine wisdom would seem to open certain contingencies, suggesting a more “organic” and less mechanistic government of reality.⁴²¹

Ferguson rejects the idea of material determinacy on much the same grounds as Grotius. The laws of nature are *authorities*, not comprehensive physical determinates. In saying what is or is not the case the laws of nature also define what can and cannot be the case. After Newton, the laws of nature and the divine will are more or less equivocated and brand of determinacy contains two crucial implications for eighteenth-century thought. On the one hand, equivocating divine will with natural law enshrines any event or idea as God-breathed. Newton’s German counterpart, Gottfried Leibniz, had suggested that because God could do no other than create the best of all possible worlds, this world must in fact be the best possible, for “if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world.”⁴²² This is possible because God has “ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest.”⁴²³ What this “pre-established harmony” means is that evils we experience are a necessary part of God’s original creative act. And we have seen already in chapter two why Scottish theorists were inclined to accept the basic material determinacy, or “pre-established harmony,” of western history, and parse it into four eras of commercial innovation. Determinacy was therefore read back into the very narrative of history itself, reinterpreting it as a story about material and rational progress.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 53

⁴²¹ Ferguson can be seen throughout the *Principles* to draw upon “organic” imagery deliberately opposed to “mechanistic.” See especially Part I, chapter 3, section xiv and part I, chapter 1, section i.

⁴²² G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge, 1952), 128.

⁴²³ Ibid.

When the purposes of God were conflated with the natural law and the story of history retold as a narrative of material progress, it is almost inevitable that God's intentions would soon be considered *in terms of* material progress. Commercially speaking, as was seen in chapter four, determinacy was fundamental to market logic in the eighteenth-century such that the laws of nature are identified with the express will of God. Economic man functions in such-and-such a way, as do the patterns that result over a period of time, and therefore when supported by the great history of economic innovation, even the injustices and evils of the market are sanctified by ends the market pursues. Indeed, modern commercial theory is still beholden to these mechanistically conceived models. The study of modern economics itself has become in the modern age a study of models comprised essentially of variables. Use of the word "variable" is a bit of misnomer, of course, for economic models depend on conceptualizing even indeterminate signifiers to get explanatory equations off the ground. Modern economics dismisses indeterminacy, in other words, because as an essentially mathematical discipline it is premised on fixed and determined variables of commercial information, actions, and events.⁴²⁴ It is precisely this brand of determinacy which disallows spontaneity, uniqueness, altruism, non-consumptive political action, and other potential defeaters to the "triumph of determinacy" that Ferguson wished so adamantly to resist.⁴²⁵ He wished to resist it, I suggest, because determinacy draws upon a pagan, not Christian conception of human existence; an alien political theology that confuses how the world participates in the life of God. It is not enough to say simply that creation is given perfect license to be what it is—it must also give account for how it fails to exist in the right way. "Providential deism," as Charles Taylor has defined the period in question, might refer to an *emerging* school of thought in the long eighteenth-century but mistakenly assumes it to be the *dominant* view of eighteenth-century philosophy and theology.⁴²⁶ To better understand how this version of determinacy found support and migrated into commercial theory more broadly, we turn our attention to the next conceptual "resistance" on which Ferguson sets his sights: Universality.

⁴²⁴ The developing field of Behavioural Physics proves rather troubling in this regard; as though human action could be predictable enough to fit within alpha-numeric variables of mathematical certainty.

⁴²⁵ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), chapter 7.

⁴²⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), part III. See also *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

Universality

What do I mean when I suggest that Ferguson resists universality? I certainly do not mean to claim that Ferguson rejects universals or that he is not a realist; he undoubtedly is. Universals are real and objects in existence refer to them—or depending on one's view, are supported by them—when truth claims are under consideration. Belief in the existence of God, for example, is thought to be universal.⁴²⁷ “Principles” of universality, on the other hand, are truths that do not depend upon human conception of them in order to be authoritative. Principles contain ideas that operate like axioms, anchoring and integrating other ideas to which they relate. But their truth is not person-dependent. He has no problem with the objective existence and authority of universals, indeed they are necessary; rather, his concern is with *claims* of universality, as when one presumes to have achieved universal scope. His critique of universality is therefore largely epistemic in orientation; the principles adhere in reality but the hurried claiming and application of unjustified principles should be resisted. The spirit behind Ferguson's resistance to empirical certitude was later given a more penetrating and critical focus by Hegel, in whom we can see the persistence of Ferguson's reservation. The *Phenomenology* begins by treating consciousness in much the way Ferguson has treated the more generic concept of mind, as something to *apprehend* but not to *comprehend*.⁴²⁸ Sense-certainty, Hegel explains, might appear the richest and truest kind of knowledge, but on reflection we find that “this very certainty proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth.”⁴²⁹ Sense perceptions are not immediate truths chiseling the mind's *tabula rasa*. “An actual sense-certainty is not...pure immediacy, but an instance of it.”⁴³⁰ For Hegel, universals are located in the *particular*, where essence and instance synthesize to open the universal door. Sense certitude is never

⁴²⁷ “The belief of the existence of God has been universal,” Ferguson claim in one of his lectures, “and cannot depend on circumstances peculiar to any age or nation, but must result of human nature, or the suggestion of circumstances that occur in every place and age.” See *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (Whitefish, Kessinger Publishing), part III, sections 1 and 2.

⁴²⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A. V. Miller trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 58. In our review of Hegel we are concerned here only with his critique of we have called ‘universality’—the claiming of rational certitude and absolute rational scope—not the doctrine of universals within Hegel's vast system.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

immediate but always mediated—universals colored with a particular hue. History is the site of this dialectic as it tells the story of incarnate universality. Ferguson would affirm the historical site of this dialectic perhaps, but would resist the eschatological implications Hegel's historical 'spirit' conveys. As we have referred to its eighteenth-century mode, at any rate, universality represents a perspective claiming rational completeness in a world teeming with incompleteness, ambiguity, tension, and paradox.

Anyone who has lived long enough to grasp the balance of intelligible order and confounding chaos in the created order, with its seasons and vicissitudes, is aware "he cannot define knowledge, nor tell what it is to know, any more than he can tell what it is for the mind to exist."⁴³¹ In its pithiest formulation, skepticism calls into question certain knowledge claims on the grounds that "knowledge" is itself unknowable. One cannot describe adequately even what it means "to know," and so one's conception of things is described alternatively in terms of "ideas" forming images, types, or copies resembling originals. Challenging our understanding of what ideas are and how they are acquired is the limitation of language's reliance on analogy and metaphor, in which representation of "impressions" of originals can only draw upon illustrations of how original ideas are "copied" intellectually. In short, "we cannot have knowledge of a subject if we have not any notion of it."⁴³² Behind every piece of knowledge are notional preconditions that make knowledge possible—grammatical rules, linguistic customs, logic, and so forth. These preconditions are equal parts linguistic and conventional. In his most focused treatment of knowledge, "On Knowledge in General," Ferguson seems to have a mind to reject the whole fledgling project we have come to call modern epistemology. The theoretical impetus to explain comprehensively the mind and its content is essentially mistaken, he thinks, "and hence the skepticism of ingenious men."⁴³³ This inexplicability of mind resonates with the eighteenth-century discipline of "pneumatics," which when defined by its etymological roots signifies something akin to "*spirit* of the mind." Immaterial, intangible, and incomprehensible, the mind when made the direct object of study shrouds itself in mysteries. Yet, at the same time, there is no sense denying the reality of knowledge *en toto*, since all must be

⁴³¹ Ferguson, *Principles Vol. I*, 70.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 76.

cautious “neither to admire nor condemn what they do not know.”⁴³⁴ The complication Ferguson wishes to avoid in his consideration of knowledge and its applications is the claim to have *explained* the complexities of the mind, which Ferguson asserts boldly when considering his own method to “investigate and to apply, not to explain, the laws of conception and will.”⁴³⁵

Ferguson opposes the theme of rational priority inasmuch as it is included in the eighteenth-century narrative and in seeking to grasp fully at the nature of Ferguson’s reservation, we can summarize this transition as consisting of three elements: rational immediacy, noetic certitude, and the exaltation of ideals.⁴³⁶ The first relates to impressions made upon the mind with each experience. Material experience leaves an immaterial mark on the perceiving mind. The second, noetic certitude, maintains simply that one’s beliefs are held naturally with complete certitude. These conclusive beliefs are then leveled authoritatively upon reality in ways expressed by the third theme, as exaltation of ideals. Certitude precipitates the eventual consecration of ideals, replacing the governing order of reality with the intellectual principles achieved through scientific evaluation of experience. The three themes are therefore collaborative. Ferguson’s response to this joint subordination of metaphysical authority to rational comprehension is most sharply addressed in his treatment of the “fundamental law of morality” in chapter two, part two of the *Principles*.⁴³⁷ The moral significance and effect of this subordination was what Ferguson found most problematic and helps explain his positive attempt to underscore the metaphysical, and indeed *religious*, character of morality.

Eighteenth-century moral philosophy focused extensively on the interior constellation of affections causally enlivening morality. Beginning with Shaftesbury’s invention of the Moral Sense and continuing through Hutcheson, Smith, and Hume, moral authority became ever more narrowly defined by intellectual capacities or faculties; the moral “sense” itself becoming but a super-added function similar to that of smelling, tasting, or touching. Moral deliberation

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ The transition Ferguson opposes is what at least one modern commentator has referred to as the dissolution of reality into subjectivity. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

⁴³⁷ As will be seen, the argument is also reiterated in several sections of the *Essay*.

thus became a natural, inferentially immediate function; learned from birth, ingrained by society, and refined by attention to public perception. At the time of Ferguson's appointment to the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, Smith and Hume had already sought to reduce morality to a conceptual singularity—"fellow-feeling" and "sympathy" respectively. In Smith's case, we have but to note that his text on moral philosophy is cast in terms of a *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which is to say that the subject and object of morality are one and the same. Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiries*, and to a lesser extent his *Essays*, make passions the central object of moral theory. Smith and Hume's mistake, at least on Ferguson's view, was to understand sentiment and reason as separable; one as capable of moral evaluation and the other as amoral. Emphasizing sentiment led Smith and Hume to devote most of their attention to development of a re-envisioned virtue ethic naturally framed in terms of habits and customs. Worrisome to Ferguson about this configuration is its extreme internalization of moral authority and privileging of human judgment. As will be seen later in this essay, affections offer the spring sunlight that nurtures a budding romanticism.

For Ferguson, on the other hand, *benevolence* is the fundamental law of morality. All virtues that have ever been named, especially the classical virtues of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice, converge at a conceptual starting-point of ultimate meaning—benevolence. He often refers to benevolence as though largely synonymous with "goodness," or a "good-will" (its etymological root), since the "greatest good incident to human nature is the love of mankind."⁴³⁸ This love serves as the prop to all the other virtues and aids each person's attempt to observe them in their conduct. "Benevolence, therefore, may in some degree be considered as a principle of wisdom, of fortitude, and temperance; and...we cannot greatly err in assuming it the fundamental or primary object of moral law."⁴³⁹ Establishing love as the chief good of humankind and the unity of the virtues, we perceive already the beginnings of a thoroughly Christian, and perhaps more particularly Augustinian, account of ethics.⁴⁴⁰ Following his revelation of the fundamental law of morality,

⁴³⁸ Ferguson, *Principles Vol. II*, 110. The reader may find it initially peculiar that Ferguson refers to the "greatest good" as love of mankind, rather than the love of God. Why he does not need to refer to love of God in this passage will become clear later.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁴⁰ For an excellent review of Augustine's political ethics see Eric Gregory's *Politics and the Order of Love* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

Ferguson then treats “applications” of the moral law as discerned through moral science. This “science” of morality “abstracts from local forms and observances” and “becomes in the mind a principle of extensive benevolence by which the individual states himself as part in the order of nature, and entirely devoted to the will of its Author.”⁴⁴¹ It is worth noting that “science” is nowhere defined by Ferguson as the embodiment of scientific *method*, but rather as a lens through which to clarify perception of the created order. Skepticism chastens science. Nevertheless, he describes science as “the highest attainment of created intelligence and nearest approach to a communication with the supreme Creator.”⁴⁴² As a discipline it “contemplates the form of beauty,” putting one in touch with the substance of creative brilliance. *Moral* science studies reality, for it is “more obvious to most men than even the qualities of mind itself.”⁴⁴³ If this *reductive* science is applied subjectively rather than objectively; that is, if we apply moral interrogation strictly to the interior moral life, then moral “science” becomes precisely what Hume insists—a “science of man.” Sentiments, affections, passions, and other internally non-rational powers are now cultivated in the scientific Petri dish. Whether such interior powers are “approved” or “disapproved” thus becomes a serious moral problem. What sorts of criteria, for example, can measure the moral worth of affective powers? Why do we praise or blame others for what they do?

Accounting for moral approbation persists throughout the eighteenth-century and Ferguson is quick to demonstrate just how many voices have given credence to it. Clark, Shaftesbury, Kames, Smith, and Hume are all shown to have occupied themselves with this question of why we are inclined to praise or blame others, and for what reason. Ferguson insists that it should not matter whether we find another’s conduct morally pleasing or odious, but whether certain actions committed are either *right* or *wrong*. “Mankind are not agreed” on what actions are to be praised or blamed, and “they differ no less in what they admire than in what they enjoy.”⁴⁴⁴ According to his interlocutors, virtues and the approbation resulting from them are reflected in an action’s congruence with excellence or perfection. Yet, Ferguson rejoins, “mankind are not agreed on this subject,” for “the idea of perfection no doubt

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 134.

may be associated with subjects divested of merit.”⁴⁴⁵ His concern is that ideal standards of perfect virtue will be wrongly assigned to actions that are, in truth, largely or entirely immoral. “External actions” may result from any number of internal conditions of mind variously “different in different instances” and therefore not universal. The reason why “there is not any certain rule of approbation or disapprobation respecting the manners or behavior of men” is that “the same physical action in one instance applauded as a virtue, in another instance is reprobated as a crime; or rather...where the physical action is the same, the moral action is altogether different and is an object of approbation and disapprobation corresponding to that difference of the moral quality.”⁴⁴⁶ There is often an enormous difference, in other words, between what an action accomplishes and what one *thinks* an action accomplishes. What is in one place commended as an act of bravery might in another place receive condemnation for foolishness, and Ferguson gives examples of how widely and frequently this ethical tension can realistically occur. But the problem is not merely one of moral reality and faulty perceptions. The moral content of an action is assigned according to general customs of a people, such that what is “mannerly” in one place might be an “offense” in another. Context is therefore imperative to moral ascription. The tension introduced by this turn to contextual assessment vexes us because “we are not qualified to perceive in what manner the moral action...should be differently *understood*, or in what manner the same moral action should result from physical performances extremely different.”⁴⁴⁷ Attributes admirable or detestable may vary greatly from place to place and from person to person; people may simply have different opinions on the commendations due an action when many “actions of men are considered more as *expressions* of what they mean or intend, than as operations materially beneficial or hurtful.”⁴⁴⁸ In either case, whether considering the consequences or the intentions of an act, complications are induced by misinterpretation. For Ferguson, however, regardless of how intentions or consequences are interpreted, the truly benevolent does whatever *bene-fits* the world around him, since it is in fact “beneficent to treat every person in the manner which

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 140 (emph. mine).

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

he himself conceives to be beneficial or kind.”⁴⁴⁹ Opinion does not alter the rightness or wrongness of an act, which altogether overrides what any one may think of it, because differences of opinion “will be equally found not to affect the original or the essential distinction between moral right and wrong.”⁴⁵⁰ This distinction leads him to the interesting conclusion that disagreements over approbation are in reality disagreements about the “use of words, not in conceiving the distinctions of right and wrong.”⁴⁵¹ The crucial issue, then, is that the principles of approbation do not assist in discerning the moral propriety of an action and so should be jettisoned in favor of the more holistic evaluative tool—rightness.

Defending his flank against the looming charge of relativism, Ferguson clarifies his claim by reminding the reader that the first law of morality designates “the love of mankind as the greatest good to which human nature is competent.”⁴⁵² Every society is aware of moral principles corresponding with those of other societies and so therefore comprise a “rule” by which each may judge the meaning or significance of an action. This “rule,” he suggests, is the Rule of Propriety. Its elegance as a rule is displayed in its allowing certain contextual distinctions while at the same time disallowing total rejection or ingenious recasting of moral principles. It applies efficiently to cases great and small; personal as well as social. Endurance of propriety is reinforced by its customary nature, ensuring meaningful continuities with history. Custom buttresses the authorial potency of the Rule. Customs illumine but do not determine the Rule, just as the Rule illumines but does not determine customs. Yet, what are we to do when customs violate the Rule of Propriety? How are the claims of custom and the Rule to be arbitrated? The Rule applies “wherever the manners of our country are dangerous to its safety or have a tendency to enfeeble or to corrupt the minds of men; to deprive the citizen of his rights; or the innocent of his security; it is our duty to do what is for the good of our fellow creatures, even in opposition to the fashion and custom of the times which we live.”⁴⁵³ When custom and right no longer correspond in certain particulars, the task of society becomes one of correcting injustices, to *right* wrongs.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 149.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 154.

Ferguson seems to have understood the biblical command to love thy neighbor, as have many Christian theorists, to imply a duty all are obliged to observe. This duty consists in the *command* of God as an expression of his will. Aristotle's virtue ethic, for example, cannot provide the same exemplary moral guidance because the very idea of striking a mean between extremes is misleading: a "proper mean" is derived conceptually "from a previous knowledge of what is right."⁴⁵⁴ In fact, to pursue the middle course between two extremes is to have chosen the course of mediocrity for mediocrity's sake. Does an extreme version of justice or right exist? How might it do so? What are its salient features? Merit and demerit are properties rightly attributed to *mind*, which can exercise itself excellently or ignorantly but never encouraged to perform what is mediocre. Wisdom, goodness, temperance, and fortitude are all "excellences" of mind. Ferguson proximately locates merit in the mind because external actions "do not appear to be vested with any moral quality until the movement performed is traced to its connection with the disposition of the mind from which it proceeds."⁴⁵⁵ One cannot judge of the conditions in another's mind and so cannot ascertain whether praise or blame is due. But if others cannot decide merit, how then is it decided? His response points toward history and to God's governance of it; thinking historically about a moral action demands that "qualities of mind" and "movements of the body" be "combined together in the conception which men mutually form in their moral distinctions."⁴⁵⁶ As we have seen, only history can tell us about what man is capable of performing and what the shape of his moral obligations might be. Actions *disclose*, or "imply," certain qualities of mind bringing to expression previously unseen or unknown interior powers. With this suggestion Ferguson also demonstrates biblical awareness, for "wherever wisdom and goodness exist, proper and beneficent conduct will follow as the tree produces its fruit" (Matt.7:17).⁴⁵⁷ Wisdom and goodness are "approved on their own account as constituents of perfection and happiness."⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

If the Moral Law is defined by its “expression of what is good,” to what does the moral law owe its authority?⁴⁵⁹ Obligations and sanctions of the moral law, its essential binding force, are derived from the command of God: “the Sovereign of the universe, by having made things as they are, has given his command and promulgated his law in behalf of morality; and in every instance of conformity to his law, and in every infraction of it, continues to apply the sanction of happiness and misery.”⁴⁶⁰ Doing moral good is an act of obedience to the divine command. It is an act done happily, for one can be assured that the command requires what it does precisely because it makes ultimate happiness possible. To obey the law of love apart from any sense of goodness would be to fall short of the command, because it would not be out of love for God that the action was undertaken. So much then for Kant’s call to observe duty for duty’s sake. Religion and morality cannot be separated, as they “share in a *genuine alliance*”:

The wisdom and goodness which we perceive to be the constituents of happiness are likewise enjoined by the Sovereign command of God. They are presented to our thoughts as attributes of the Supreme being himself, and as forming in him the objects of reverence and love; and our own capacity attaining in any degree to *a participation of these qualities* is considered as the highest perfection or prerogative of our nature.⁴⁶¹

Humankind enjoys wisdom and goodness to the extent that it participates in the life of God, who reveals his character as an exemplary guide to moral deliberative action. From the person of God proceeds the authority of his government extending both to the mind and to the actions of humanity, restraining “not only the overt acts of iniquity, but even the thoughts, wishes or purposes which may lead to such external effects.”⁴⁶² Indeed, asks Ferguson rhetorically, “in what is the love of God different from the love of goodness itself?”⁴⁶³ In positing this question he makes explicit the link between the essence of the law—goodness—and the God in whom it consists. Various principles, rules, and laws of morality therefore receive their authority exclusively from the command and person of God.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 168.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 176.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

Universality is attributable only to God, for it is only by God's goodness that the disclosure of law instructs the human mind. Judgment is a cumbersome power for humans to wield, simultaneously overwhelming and supportive of the moral life as such. Ferguson's account of Christian moral philosophy demonstrates why moral authority cannot be grounded in any human faculty or force. Claims of knowledge prove slippery even under the first level of scrutiny, requiring that one take care with their claims of what is known or unknown, to be praised or blamed. "Under the highest measures of conviction which attend our perception of things, truth does not appear to be necessary, and the reality may be different from the appearance that is perceived by us."⁴⁶⁴ Such contingencies invite us to relinquish our claims to certitude. History proves repeatedly that items cherished as most stable in the social order often pass into the twilight of disfavor as quickly as they arrived. Morality cannot be reduced to sentiment or custom—or, in truth, to the rational adjudication of causes—because morals, in their continuity, cannot be bound to either power. Sentiments and customs can be false, unjust, or even immoral, but in suggesting that morals are vested in the right and true as decided by God, Ferguson avoids the self-same charge of universality. He avoids it because the universality he claims is not human in origin or cause. One has only to attempt a search for moral prescriptions within Ferguson's writings, a sermon and invitations to love notwithstanding, to realize that one is dealing with a moralist who understands the uncontrollable relation he shares with the moral order. Each must live life in deference to the true and the right—to obey and to act in rightness. This is best observed by studying the annals of history, which is why his *Essay* maintains as one of its dominant themes the overt difference between the changeable and the unchangeable. "Rude" nations and "polished" nations are not rude and polished by virtue of their customs, as was so popularly asserted throughout the eighteenth-century, but by virtue of their actions in service to the public. Error remains an open possibility to which all humanity may succumb.

What does a dialectical confrontation between determinacy and universality bestow in its synthesis? This question is not easily answered. One reason for its elusiveness is that romanticism contains within itself the conceptual synthesis of this dialectic only *in part*; that is, romanticism is not the product of this synthesis but the

⁴⁶⁴ Ferguson, *Principles Vol I*, 83.

descriptive heading it belongs to—romanticism envelops the synthesis. So, we require a rounded picture of romanticism’s eighteenth-century form. Like determinacy and universality, romanticism also interrogates the natural order of things, but it has a broader function, operating as an arbiter of the frustrated antagonisms between determinacy and universality. With this in mind, in the material that follows, I will attend procedurally to the wider domain implied by the Romantic impulse and turn to the question of nature itself. In what follows I will provide an account of the various contours of 18th century Romanticism, in order to observe the many respects in which Ferguson is romantic and, more importantly, the way in which he certainly is *not* romantic. A crucial question, and one which will undergird this look at the commercial status of nature, concerns how nature accepts or rejects the artifacts of man. At the crux of this question, as I will observe, Ferguson helps us to understand that a dialectical confrontation is being enacted here between determinacy and universality. We begin with an idea of what romanticism is.

Romanticism

The truth or falsity of “romanticism,” as a signifier, depends on what kind of “romanticism” is being thought of. If a “plurality of romanticisms” adhere in society (as has been suggested by scholars seeking paradigms for interpreting the romantic impulse) then the success of my claim that Ferguson resists “romanticism” will depend upon what *kind* of romanticism is being considered.⁴⁶⁵ What is the precise nature of the romanticism Ferguson finds problematic? Are there elements of early romanticism he finds worthy of assent? From his biography we know he adored poetry and participated regularly in readings; the intensity of his literary appreciation is also doubly reinforced by vocal support of John Home’s much maligned play, *Douglas* (more on the ‘Douglas affair’ below). Ferguson retired to the countryside of Peebles to try his hand at farming while still very much in intellectual form, presumably for no other reason than that the challenge intrigued him. He even wrote a seminal history of *The Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, an effort

⁴⁶⁵ Arguments for a ‘plurality of romanticisms’ are found in A. O. Lovejoy, ‘On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,’ in *Essays on the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948). For a more recent and historically attentive contemporary treatment of romanticism see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayer, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, Catherine Porter trans. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

some have interpreted as displaying certain romantic tendencies.⁴⁶⁶ In contemporary use, the term is thrown about as though synonymous with “nostalgia” over a long-lost past.⁴⁶⁷ Thinking deeper about the etymology of Romanticism one might also be inclined to associate it with adoration of all things antiquarian and Roman. This is not an unattractive inference, but eighteenth-century thought contains a great deal more romantic potency than is attached solely to an appreciation of classicism.

Ferguson’s thought certainly displays romantic appreciations for the moral and political significance of antiquity. “Rome” was a laudable and grand civic idea invariably lost because Roman citizens had forgotten what it *meant* to be Roman: “in proportion as the character of Roman citizens lost its consideration and its consequence, the name was easily communicated to all the subjects or natives of any province.”⁴⁶⁸ Empire building, motivated as it was by the accumulation of riches, created the conditions that brought the honor and glory of Rome to embarrassment and ruin. Personal felicities of each citizen were transferred to the grandeur of Caesar and state: from happiness derived from personal excellence to happiness derived from national fame and fortune. Ferguson is “romantic” in his view of ancient Rome as offering an illuminating contrast to modern principles of moral and political order. The idea of Rome—its blindness, ambition, structure, opulence, law, and spirit—receives a balanced presentation mindful of both Rome’s failures and its successes. Antiquity teaches us something about how to live morally and politically with our fellow man.

Ferguson’s defense of John Home’s stage play *Douglas* also reveals romantic partiality. His brief pamphlet *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered* responded to anxious opposition of Kirk clergy, led by Rev. John Witherspoon, by rebutting their claim to theatre’s morally insidious nature. His argument is almost comically adroit. Stage performance, he begins to tell us, has been in cultural currency for well over two hundred years and just how corrupting theatre has been in the course of these two centuries is not easily discerned. Britain is perhaps average

⁴⁶⁶ Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute, 1825). Ferguson’s *History* was remarkably well-received and used regularly as an early-education text in the history of the Roman Empire.

⁴⁶⁷ On the mistake of reading “nostalgia” (as retrospective longing) into eighteenth-century discourse see J. C. D. Clark’s “keywords” in *English Society 1660-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁶⁸ Ferguson, *Progress and Termination*, 391.

by comparison, with good and bad men being found mixed in every age and place. His three principal arguments in favor of the stage are as follows: if the stage is morally poisonous, then the effects are slow to inset; exemplary portrayals in stage performance may in fact correct moral missteps; and these morals can also purify stage production.⁴⁶⁹ Essential to all three arguments is their moral acuteness. Opposition to the stage cannot be wrought from scripture, for scripture does not denounce it. In fact, the Apostle Paul himself seems at least to have been well acquainted with the Greek plays, alluding to them in both Acts 17:28 and 1 Cor. 15:33. The parables of Jesus, too, summon similar kinds of imaginative effort. Parables and plays both tell stories, remarks Ferguson, and both are superior conduits of moral instruction. The novel artistry of theatre can awaken in the skeptical mind an imaginary account of how fictitious characters have failed or succeeded when confronted with moral challenges. Edinburgh's stage plays are plays "which excel in moving compassion, which interest an audience in behalf of amiable characters, which give the proper applause to virtue, and treat vice with ignominy and reproach."⁴⁷⁰ The stage is therefore commendable if it can in its comedies and tragedies re-create and encourage moral imagination. Plays offer a novel form of moral education, so long as license is not carried too far. Antiquity's appreciation for theatre does not go unrecognized by Ferguson, for plays are but natural expressions of a nation's rich civic arts—the fictitious dramatization of real political life. But appreciating Roman political history and Greek stage are a fairly harmless romantic affections; might something else complicate romanticism's cultured decency?

In turning to an analysis of Ferguson's consideration of problematic romantic impulses one finds a more complex picture. Both biographically and theoretically he displays romantic commitments, but there are clearly certain tendencies of eighteenth-century Britain—politically, socially, commercially, religiously—that attract his criticism. The way he describes nature and the natural ordering of reality often takes the form of admiration: a nature in constant movement, conducive to life, intelligently balanced. He admires nature, but he does not adore it; nature is given prominence, but not primacy. Here, at any rate, we are concerned primarily with the spirits and impulses of romanticism Ferguson *resists*, though occasionally with

⁴⁶⁹ Adam Ferguson, *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh: 1757)).

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

unconscious tension: a supposed state of nature, political novelty and rebellion, and the sentimentalization of morals. We will also want to capture conceptual oppositions generated by the elevation of nature to ultimate authority. But before interrogating Ferguson's romantic hesitations, it is essential first to sketch conceptions of nature prevailing in the modern period.

In seeking to define "nature," modern minds tend to gravitate toward the scientific bastions of biological and physico-mechanical description. That is simply how the modern imagination has been formed. Scientific method and the atomistic reductionism it gave birth to and now fosters objectifies nature to the point of numbering its constituent electrons. Water is not nature's life-blood, for example; it is H₂O. Nature is reduced to a vast network of bio-electrical reactions tamed from oblivion by still more bio-electrical reactions. It perhaps goes without saying that modern naturalism is the negation of supernaturalism. But the term "nature" designates vastly more than the relations between electrical charges and chemical compounds. Philosopher Robert Spaemann has commended a double meaning for the term: "on the one hand, it refers to the origins of things, to what comes first; on the other, it refers to norms and purposes, criteria by which to evaluate our projects, actions and situations."⁴⁷¹ The meaning of the term has also been shaped by its adjectival opposites, like "artificial," "voluntary," "historical," and "customary." Eighteenth-century theories of nature had of course been profoundly shaped by the Newtonian and Leibnizian law-abiding cosmos—nature as all-encompassing. Everything that occurs is equally a result of some previous natural cause. Even someone like Hume, who at least hoped to retain some remnant of custom in his natural speculations, could not avoid (eventually) relegating nature to "patterns" of natural occurrences taken to be natural laws. In the eighteenth-century, therefore, "nature" is totalizing; "the *unnatural* means the same thing as the impossible."⁴⁷² Early-modern fascination with the mythic state of nature illustrates the pervasiveness of this comprehensive and reductionist viewpoint. Consequently, nature was stripped of its intrinsic *telos* and assigned new goals authorized by nature's pure empirical tendencies. The supposed "state of nature" was held in contrast to "civilization"—

⁴⁷¹ Robert Spaemann, *Essays in Anthropology*, G. de Graf and J. Mumford trans. (Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2010), 75.

⁴⁷² Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, A. Madigan and J. Alberg trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 161 (emph. mine).

pure nature versus constructed artifact. The nature-artifact duality furnished philosophers with a comparative dichotomy for moral and political evaluation and thereby established the question of whether nature and artifact could be made compatible with one another or remain forever antithetical.

These two romantic appropriations of the concept of nature help clarify the substance of Ferguson's critique of romanticism. He addresses the "double-meaning" of nature and the relation of artifacts and customs to nature in the opening passages of his *Essay*, in a section entitled, "Of the Questions relating to the State of Nature." As a preliminary observation it is of some relevance that he feels he must address the state of nature at the very outset of his *Essay*. Prioritizing the idea in this way he hints both at the dominance of contractarian political visions in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, as well as to his own reservations about contractarian viability for the modern political order.⁴⁷³ He refers to the state of nature as a "question" inviting critical response. Commendation from Hobbes, Locke, Hutcheson and other contractarians was for political philosophy to reach back into the natural origins of the human species, before the establishment of any artifact, state, rule, or government for society's legitimate *raison d'état*. Against this original state of nature all other contemporary political states would be comparatively judged; the pure, ungoverned realm of necessity and passion. For Hobbes, "the condition of mere nature" is "absolute liberty."⁴⁷⁴ Likewise, for Locke, to understand political power or right one must first understand "what state all men are naturally in, and that is a state of *perfect freedom* to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man."⁴⁷⁵ This state is also a state of equality, "wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another."⁴⁷⁶ Rousseau's more colorful claim that "man was born free, and he is everywhere in

⁴⁷³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980); Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Publishing, 1968). Occasionally included in this traditional list of early-modern contractarian thought are Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and Hume's *Treatise*. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904) and much of Robert Burns' pastoral poetry would be excellent literary examples of romanticism in this regard.

⁴⁷⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 245.

⁴⁷⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 8.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

chains” enriches the state of nature’s poetic vitality.⁴⁷⁷ Each theorist believes firmly that covenants constitute the binding force of social contracts—beginning with the family and continuing through the wider commonwealth—and that within a state of nature contracts are based on principles of equality as much as they are on freedom. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all elevate the ideals of liberty and equality within their accounts of the state of nature and enshrine them as foundational insights to social order and political constitutions.

Against this early-modern tendency Ferguson interrogates the “question” of a supposed historical state of nature. He criticizes semi-romantic poets, historians, and moralists who consider past ages radically different from present conditions. The assumption seems to be that “the first state of our nature must have born no resemblance to what men have exhibited in any subsequent period.”⁴⁷⁸ Identifying original qualities of man and expressing the “limits between nature and art” are done simultaneously. Ferguson thus identifies what traditionally has been viewed as one of romanticism’s early modern tensions, between art and nature.⁴⁷⁹ Some political theorists have sought to exalt nature and its impulses to previously unseen prominence, while others have tried to represent man as merely a learning animal or conflicted creature predisposed to perpetual warfare. Yet, the “desire of laying the foundation of a favorite system” has “led to many fruitless inquiries,” explains Ferguson, and has ultimately led philosophers to form a theory that amalgamates a few admirable traits in an “imaginary” origin in bygone ages.⁴⁸⁰ History tells a different story:

[in both] the earliest and the latest accounts collected from every quarter of the earth represent mankind as assembled in troops and companies; and the individual always joined by affection to one party, while he is possibly opposed to another; employed in the exercise of recollection and foresight; inclined to communicate his own sentiments, and to be made acquainted with those of others; these facts must be admitted as the foundation of all our reasoning relative to man.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁷ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 49.

⁴⁷⁸ Ferguson, *Essay*, 7.

⁴⁷⁹ On this point regarding the art/nature tension in the eighteenth-century see especially Lovejoy’s “On Discrimination of Romanticisms,” 239.

⁴⁸⁰ Ferguson, *Essay*, 9.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Notions of a wholly free and equal pre-political man are complete fiction. No record exists that has not found humankind already gathered in community, united by affections and in communication one with another.

The attempt to trace an imaginary state of nature “through ages and scenes unknown” was Rousseau’s historiographic mistake.⁴⁸² Man’s purest form, on Rousseau’s account, is the isolated and perfectly free man who has not yet been corrupted by political society and its enslaving demands. Ferguson rebuts this claim by reminding us that humankind has always been found in groups and has always been seen as radically superior to the animals. Society indeed appears to be “as old as the individual.”⁴⁸³ The idea of a pre-political man and thus the idea of a bygone state of nature is simply a grandly fabricated myth about an ideal man with ideal liberty and equality. The second, and perhaps most obvious problem with Rousseau’s history, is that humanity does not have the intellectual exposure or capacity to posit an existence radically different from present reality. When theorists attempt to fill holes in knowledge-gaps by crafting new stories, that tactic clues us in to certain practical ambiguities about our everyday experience—especially if that experience is overtly political—and raises the question of whether another, more superior source of wisdom is available to us. If we follow the logic of Rousseau’s argument we are inevitably deceived into thinking that certain mysteries will be opened by the “wisdom of nature” that discloses the meaning of human events simply by identifying the “operation of physical powers” that produced them.⁴⁸⁴ The impulse is therefore naturalistic at heart. Yet the *telos* of natural occurrences is precisely what we typically attribute to God and his creative genius, for that is the true source of mystery and explains why we cannot hope to *solve* the problem of our origins.⁴⁸⁵ “We are no longer to search for the source of existence,” because we know that mysteries are latent in the creative genius of God; “we can only collect the laws

⁴⁸² Ferguson refers here to Rousseau’s early essay *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*. See *Discours sur l’égalité* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941).

⁴⁸³ Ferguson, *Essay*, 12.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ “The concept of nature is now taken to be anthropomorphic, while the essentially *teleological* idea of things in the cosmos having “movement in themselves” is understood as the usurpation of a *divine* quality.” For more exceptional contemporary engagement with the question of human nature, see Robert Spaemann, *Essays in Anthropology*, Guido de Graaff and James Mumford trans. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010), chapter 1.

which the author of nature has established.”⁴⁸⁶ At best, all we can hope for is some insight into a “mode of providence before unknown.”⁴⁸⁷

This point on intellectual humility loops Ferguson back around to the romantic bifurcation of nature and art. Here he states straightforwardly, “art itself is natural to man.”⁴⁸⁸ From the beginning man appears to be an “artificer of his own nature, as well as his fortune,” and seems to set his will always on invention and contrivance. This occurs no matter where man dwells, regardless of climate or circumstance. Human beings are at once complex and simple, “obstinate and fickle,” complaining regularly about new innovations and yet “never sated with novelty.”⁴⁸⁹ Humanity’s general attitude seems always intent on improving its circumstances; to get the upper hand on the uncontrollable powers of human existence. As was mentioned in chapter two, if any general progression is detected, it is not rapid or hasty but slow, “like the power of a spring silently presses on every resistance.”⁴⁹⁰ Active being is likened to a “passing stream, not a stagnating pool.” In all cases the freedom found in active being is not freedom *from*, but always a freedom *for* and this because the state of nature, if the words can be made to mean anything at all, is defined almost entirely by human action. If nature were consecrated as a moral and political criterion from which to work out our deliberations it would be so consecrated at great expense to crucial deliberative categories. Virtue and vice, for example, must ultimately transcend nature, as must good and evil. Defining the good by its natural appearance results in all varieties of moral and political distortion. Ferguson then presses this point of dividing sharply between nature and art further by asking rhetorically if nature and artifact are in fact antithetical, “in what situation of the human race are the footsteps of art unknown?”⁴⁹¹ From the beginning humanity can be seen to craft artifacts for the betterment of daily life; innovations of today are but a continuation of a historical theme. Art does not replace nature, but *cooperates* with nature as it emerges *from* nature. Art is the means nature uses to preserve itself. God has created the natural order in such a way that it contains within itself the means for human

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

perpetuation and flourishing. The Creator also affords humans the opportunity to act, but “man may mistake the objects of his pursuit; he may misapply his industry, and misplace his improvements.”⁴⁹² In light of such errors, how then can one judge the rightness of any action according to its natural correspondence? The standard and source of action is found in the heart, where the truth about an action’s perfection or excellence is disclosed. In scrutinizing the ‘state of nature’ man will find that “the proper state of nature...is not a condition from which mankind are forever removed, but one to which they may now attain; not prior to the exercise of their faculties, but procured by their just application.”⁴⁹³ What one believes to be “natural” or “unnatural” is endlessly plastic, seeing as both terms are “least determinate in their meanings.”⁴⁹⁴ To Ferguson, a criterion of naturalness can clarify nothing in the moral or political order: “for *all* the actions of men are *equally* a result of their nature.”⁴⁹⁵ The very best an idea of “the natural” can deliver is a tradition, convention, habit, routine, or custom that communicates a sense of rudimentary order or stability in human affairs.

These two ways of looking at nature converge politically at the intersection of novelty and rebellion. Rousseau, for his part, did not invite or sanction rebellion *per se*, despite the fact his disjointed account of human nature and unrelenting emphasis upon the essential “rights” of freedom and equality precipitated a revolutionary spirit that would strangle the whole of France by gripping the neck of Paris. If recovering oneself means one is required to rediscover their instinctual and animalic past, then that could only be achieved (realistically) by removing the obstructions, whether institutional or conventional, mitigating the purest human expressions. Ferguson, on the other hand, along with other semi-romantics like Burke and Wordsworth, denigrates violent rebellions as categorically unjustified. His *Sermon in Ersh Language* and short pamphlet *Remarks on Dr. Price’s Observations* both deliver a poignant critique of violent rebellion.⁴⁹⁶ Recall that in the former, Ferguson takes

⁴⁹² Ibid., 15.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Adam Ferguson, *A Sermon Preached in the Ersh Language to His Majesty’s First Highland Regiment of Foot, Commanded by Lord John Murray, At their Cantonment at Camberwell, on the 18th Day of December 1745* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1756); *Remarks on Dr. Price’s Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, &c* (London: G. Kearsley, 1776).

aim at the supposition that the Divine Right of Kings can serve as warrant for violent revolt, insisting that a good political order such as existed in Britain at the time (1750's) should be viewed as a providential gift. In the latter, Ferguson counters a certain Dr. Price's claim that American colonies were correct to reject the authority of the crown under the terms set for it as a colony with a line of argument similar to that of the sermon: the colonies enjoy civic order and commercial flourishing, and so the claims to injustice—taxation without proportionate representation—do not provide an adequate basis for violent rebellion. In truth, "rebellion, if successful, never knows its limits."⁴⁹⁷ Dissenters are nothing but "secret enemies of government." Ferguson seems therefore to have seen the American rebellion as a kind of childish tantrum; the colonies had been granted a commercial and political order conducive to the good life and in turn the people of these colonies protest at not having sufficient liberty or equality. So bad was the situation that "a blush must now overspread the face of every Englishman if ever the Americans are mentioned in his presence by a stranger!"⁴⁹⁸ Edmund Burke would feel a similar embarrassment for the French in the aftermath of Revolution a decade later. That same Dr. Price who attracted Ferguson's rebuke would receive an even stronger one from Burke. If we recall here the "double-meaning" of nature we will notice that for Ferguson (and Burke) convention is the track down which origins must travel—the mediating content between the present and past. Abolishing conventions in hope of re-establishing the original nature of freedom and equality never succeeds. "Those who attempt to level, never equalize," and in the end, "the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns...undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction."⁴⁹⁹ Even *telos* latent in the original will be mediated by the convention making it intelligible.

Modern philosopher of history, Reinhart Koselleck, has stressed throughout his work the conceptual magnitude of politically objectified novelty in this period. The

⁴⁹⁷ Ferguson, *Remarks*, p.42. Several pages later Ferguson concludes that "it is evident that the colonies, actuated by the turbulent principles of their ancestors; some prompted by ambition, others instigated by a restlessness of disposition; some from giddiness, others from illusion, gave rise to this detested rebellion." (68)

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁹⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, T. H. D. Mahoney ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 55, 70.

kind of novelty we are considering is leavened by two historical concepts—“crisis” and “revolution.” It was not until the late eighteenth-century that the historical meaning of “crisis” (*krisis*), related conceptually to legal or political actions like “to separate” or “to judge,” was replaced by events—and a spirit encouraged by those events—of unavoidable “finality” or “transition.” Decision (*krisis*) was replaced by the inevitability of conflicting or changing circumstance. “From the second half of the eighteenth-century on, a religious connotation enters into the way the term is used,” and this inculcation generalizes modern experience “to such an extent that ‘crisis’ becomes a permanent concept of history.”⁵⁰⁰ The very meaning of the word “crisis” come to radically redefine the real experience of everyday life. Events of the French Revolution bring this conceptual transition to its climax by presuming that “crisis” had “become the fundamental mode of interpreting historical time.”⁵⁰¹ This will not surprise us—the Enlightenment itself is an intellectual precursor to the establishment of crisis. Where at one time crisis brought completion, the crisis of the French Revolution brought only newness.

Koselleck refers to this fundamental change in our understanding of time as *Neuzeit* (new-time, or modernity), as seeking “to conceptually grasp what previously was not at all possible.”⁵⁰² History and *Neuzeit* are in some sense wholly divorced. Time itself becomes parceled into distinct periods—ancient, medieval, and renaissance, for instance—or else thematized by century. Time is broken down into unified coefficients. The French Revolution is the political concretization of this new understanding of time as something to be humanly controlled. Revolution is the means man uses to impose himself upon time, to supersede the old for the sheer pleasure and spectacle of the new. Newness becomes the object of both history *and* future. This idea of modernity beginning with the French Revolution and its new organization of time is strengthened twice over by the fascinating attempt of French revolutionaries to fashion an entirely new calendar. Out with the Church calendar, in with the “revolutionary” calendar. The trouble, of course, is that time cannot be comprehended ahistorically. Calendars are themselves based first on the natural

⁵⁰⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” in *Journal for the History of Ideas*, M. W. Richter trans. (April 2006): 370-71.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Reinhart Koselleck, “The Eighteenth-Century as the Beginning of Modernity,” *The Practice of Conceptual History*, Todd Presner trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 162.

cycles of the world, then framed more precisely around enculturated theological observances. But the revolutionaries had convinced themselves that “a rationalized nature should ring in a new epoch in history.”⁵⁰³ Calendars emphasize and reemphasize the constant circulation of nature, while the revolutionary insists on the unrelenting newness of time. The meaning of the revolutionary calendar, as an historical event, is in the judgment (krisis) it levels on the Christian calendar, pronouncing upon the past for the purpose of future prognosis. Explains Koselleck, “the aspiration to a just order is always already pre-given as that which is to be reborn. To realize a just order thus means to reestablish it.”⁵⁰⁴ Abolition of the Christian calendar was therefore not only an attempt to replace natural time with rational time, but to replace the centerpiece of time itself—the birth and death of Jesus Christ—in hopes of abolishing the difference between past and future. Meanings of the past are latent in future possibilities. Crisis in the modern age is permanent to the extent that it incorporates eschatology into history.⁵⁰⁵

But revolution is simply the most radical expression of romanticism—a romanticism gone mad. In addition to the open possibility for violent political rebellion to realize the true romantic spirit of freedom and equality, there also subsists within the romantic *ethos* an interior impulse. What I have called the “sentimentalization of morals” found in Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith occupies a unique place in this romantic march. The feeling—or passion—behind an action determines the morality of that action and as such implies that “natural” passions be given total expression. What matters morally and politically is the feeling and energy behind actions naturally undertaken. Passions are to this extent *the* fundamental content of morals and thus, to flip the argument around, morals are themselves susceptible to revision in light of what is naturally desired. It is one thing to say that an action must fit within the natural world or must not violate the natural order, it is quite another to say that whatever is naturally desired expresses moral truth. What concerns Ferguson is not the suggestion that passions have a role in

⁵⁰³ Reinhart Koselleck, “The Revolutionary Calendar and ‘*Neu Zeit*,’” *The Conceptual Practice of History*, Todd Presner trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 151.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁰⁵ Koselleck refers here to Karl Barth, quoting from his *Commentary*: God is “the origin of the crisis of every objectivity, an origin that lacks all objectivity, the judge, the non-being of the world. The so-called history of salvation is only the continuous crisis of all history, not a history within or parallel to human history.”

moral deliberation and upon the performance of actions, or that passions cannot be groomed by custom; rather, he takes issue only with *internalizing* moral authority. Translating a previously objective moral order into a subjective set of natural passions, an order judged according to a state of nature that makes the passions truly natural, marks a dangerous turn to the subjective. Passions arising from this impulse toward isolated individuality confuse and fragment the moral order by reducing the rules of civil society to principles protecting personal rights. “Moral sense,” “sympathy,” and “fellow-feeling” are the conceptual centerpieces of an eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophy that consecrates the passions and thereby internalizes moral authority.

The romantic impulse would make its distinctly *religious* impression in the form of unpredictable “enthusiasm.” As a relatively new theological phenomenon, enthusiasm became a cheeky eighteenth-century designation for erratic emotional displays believed to manifest internal experience of the Holy Spirit. Field preaching was where this phenomenon appeared most regularly and it was enthusiasm’s repeated appearance at such gatherings that helped energize the pervasive spirit of revivalism defining the experiential undercurrent of eighteenth-century religiosity. That the theological roots of enthusiasm were of a pietistic genus further evinces the depth to which certain romantic impulses penetrated religious life. Pietism could serve as fertile soil for enthusiasm precisely because it had already become thoroughly individualistic by mid-century; enthusiasm simply broke pietism free from its unspeakable stoic heritage. If morals were reducible to the adjudication of passions, then it seemed more or less fitting that the experience of God could also be reduced to physically impassioned fervor. Kirk moderates were justified in remaining suspicious over the deliberate stress upon internal experience of God’s spirit, signaling as it did a severe and disturbing individualizing of genuine Christian faithfulness.⁵⁰⁶ Enthusiasm attempted to do religiously what other romantic impulses attempted morally and politically: to rub smooth the social, liturgical, and teleological textures of worship and to absorb present feelings of natural experience. The unforeseen and perhaps most detrimental effect of enthusiasm would be its implicit marginalizing of both the moral and political integrity of religion itself.

⁵⁰⁶ For views of Kirk moderates on “enthusiasm,” Ferguson included, see Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Linking romanticism and its impulses to the central inquiry concerning a moral commercial order would deserve its own thesis, so I will identify here only a few key points of connection. In some respects, romanticism positively chastens certain versions of industrialization that purposefully ignore the agricultural foundation of political economy. Ironically, sacralizing nature erects a barrier to the protection and preservation of habitats that sustain life. Observing custom offers another more historically embedded means by which to impose defensive or prohibitory standards. Customs tell us about the past so that our present makes sense, bringing stable continuity to the juncture of what was and now is. Customs do not reject newness or innovations out of hand; they simply discredit rapid or revolutionary novelties. Conservative romanticism of the mid to late eighteenth-century respected customs and the *telos* of nature they guarded. Radical romantics, on the other hand, sought to break the customary and teleological spine of commerce by asserting “rights” to two crucial political ideals: freer trade and social equality. The commercial sphere was believed to hold the keys for both modern portals. This brand of romanticism focuses more on the human experience of and engagement with nature than on nature itself. More broadly, it is an ideology founded on ideal impulses. Freedom and equality are two such impulses and to “realize” these ends the radical romantic proposes to topple the customs and institutions upon which political societies are founded and nurtured; that is, the romantic wishes to abolish all artifacts believed *unnatural* to human self-expression. From the romantic starting point—the state of nature—human history is one painfully long story about how artifacts, especially commercial innovations, put further distance between human being and its natural home. Ferguson has shown us why this romantic insistence on overcoming artifacts remains a fiction. History originates with artifact. Creation itself is the making of an artifact, one that is necessarily political due to its logical hierarchy of Creator over the created. Just as *in the beginning God created*, so too does humankind attempt to mimic genesis by making and developing artifacts. History begins with creation and thus artifacts are part of history’s beginning. Politically, God’s providence includes institutions that safeguard lasting order: law, government, and economic exchange being but a few. The commercial order is an artifact that cannot be abolished, and even if abolished, its elimination cannot ensure either the ideal equality or freedom desired.

An excellent contemporary example of romantic temptations to unmake political artifacts ordering civil society is that of economic de-regulation. If government were to remove the entangling thicket of regulatory and legal measures meant to preserve

a morally ordered marketplace—the assumption goes—then natural functions of the market when left to themselves would lead to the most efficient and profitable mode of general economy—the less involved is government, the more natural and virtuous the market mechanism. In the case of de-regulation, the romantic impulse for freedom is clear: instincts and natural desires of the collective Will in the marketplace are such that acting on what is natural and allowing the market its natural course does the most good by affording the most public happiness. The true Romantic will thus reject the prospect of commerce in the sense of *commercium*—coming together—by definition. Genuine romanticism opposes true commerce simply by virtue of what it is.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to identify three eighteenth-century moral and political theologies Ferguson actively resists. Determinacy, universality, and romanticism have been referred to as “themes” but could also have been described as “ideologies” or “theological perversions.” Because Ferguson does not offer a positive or systematic moral or political theology I have portrayed him in his true apologetic light. Indeed, one might observe that it was in an age of overt theological austerity that the system we have come to call capitalism made its political genesis.⁵⁰⁷ Or, to put it another way, only in the age of natural religion could an economic system as morally unreliable as market capitalism receive political sanction. In late-modern politics, moreover, not only do Western governments sanction capital markets, they positively *depend* upon them. Hamstrung by the shallowness of natural religion, at any rate, moral and political reflection in the eighteenth-century could not resist the temptation of permitting commercial spheres or practices to take whatever structure or to continue whatever practice seemed most natural. On this point the careful reader will have noticed how Ferguson’s attention is drawn to the shadows and inconsistencies of the modern age. Determinacy, for example, is a pagan, not

⁵⁰⁷ This argument is one of comparison. Jonathan Edwards, George Turnbull, and perhaps Joseph Butler notwithstanding, eighteenth-century theologians are not reputed for their prowess. When compared to other periods of theological reflection, the qualitative contrasts become all the more striking. Thus, in suggesting that the eighteenth-century is a period of “theological austerity,” I mean only to say that the triumph of natural religion was in effect the crack in the political wall that when broken allowed for the impending surge of democratic capitalism. Theology that acknowledges only natural authority is a theology without fortitude.

Christian doctrine, and he rejects philosopher's attempts to draw upon "mechanistic" metaphors to shore-up otherwise inept arguments about the natural world. "Mechanism" remains the standing metaphor for modern economics and to the extent that the Market's natural functions are upheld as ultimately authoritative—as was the case in the eighteenth-century—modern capitalism remains an ideological perversion of Christian metaphysics.

Universality is the eighteenth-century conversion of objective authority into subjective, a movement described by Hannah Arendt as "the dissolution of reality into subjective states of mind."⁵⁰⁸ When authority becomes a thing to be *claimed*, as in the case of property, the totalization of epistemology is complete. This position of universality—the way the world exists being the way I see and believe the world to exist—frees the individual to pass judgment on any state of affairs so long as he is armed with ideals the judged-of can measure up to. Rational immediacy then leads naturally to an idealizing of moral and political realities, a digression from the concrete to the abstract. Rational immediacy means that whatever one thinks one knows to be the case simply *is* the case and no mediation is required. If total freedom and equality are rational possibilities for society, then it must also be a possibility in reality. Universality is the elevation of the human perspective to the point of ultimacy and it was this subjective turn that also made determinacy and romanticism (ideally) possible.

Romanticism is dependent upon both the primacy of mechanical nature as well as the universalized human perspective because it is premised on the breakdown of any obstruction between the two ideals. As it has been addressed above, romanticism describes a series of *impulses*: appeals to a state of nature, sentimentalization of morals, and the emphasis on political novelty and rebellion. Romanticism first arises from the mythic state of nature, where the human being is wholly free of impediment, limitation, or customary artifact. The eighteenth-century hope is for communion with nature, or at least synchronization with nature's spirit. Newly achieved universality afforded romanticism an opportunity to internalize (previously) metaphysical standards of action. The sentimentalization of morals is thus reflected overtly in the "moral sense," "sympathy," and "fellow-feeling" determining what ought to be done; what *ought* be done is simply what the passions conditioned by

⁵⁰⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 282.

nature determine of themselves. Rebellion against form is expressed most radically in violent revolution that seeks to lay waste to conventions and institutions bringing coherence to the fabric of society. The idea of “society” is itself an eighteenth-century obsession courting its fair share of adorers and despisers, but radical romantics are perhaps society’s most indignant despisers of the period and it is through them that the modern understanding of self-over-society in order eventually to be (partially) for society comes to life. Radical romantics search for pure expression of feeling in a state of nature. Feeling is a species of desire, and romantic desire reaches longingly for that natural object which raises desire to a higher plane of felicity—a desiring of desire. This eternally unsettled desire can find rest only in the Absolute, for, as Jean Yves Lacoste has put it, “what excites our joy shows up our impotence to institute joy, to make it the perpetual tone of our experience.”⁵⁰⁹ Our constant anxiety is evidence that desire cannot be fully realized and thus must be yet to come. “Beatitude,” the fusion of heart and knowledge welded by vision of the Absolute, remains presently “restlessness,” since “the heart wants what it cannot claim.”⁵¹⁰ Ferguson for his part seems to have perceived the frontal edge of this crisis. The regularity with which he refers to the *Author* of nature is sufficient to highlight what he believes to disclose the depravity of a fictitious *state* of nature. Recognizing humanity is governed ultimately by an Author of nature cripples the individualist energies of romanticism by upholding the truth that the heart and its desires are not for itself but for the Author.

Under the modern pressures of determinacy, universality, and romanticism one can begin to see the wisdom in Ferguson’s concluding his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* with a treatment of political slavery. Each of these three themes undergirds modern capitalism in the West and it is staggering to realize Ferguson had already detected many of its demented goals as early as the 1760’s. The three political theologies Ferguson resists correspond to the threats modern capitalism imposes upon the meaning of history, human action, and political institutions. The latter three comprise the conceptual fortress within which societies thrive; the former three are the forces of capitalism rallying against the fortress gates. Political slavery is what occurs when walls crumble and the fortress falls to capitalist siege. But this is

⁵⁰⁹ Jean Yves Lacoste, ‘Le Desir et l’inexigible: pour lire Henri de Lubac’, in *Le monde et l’absence d’œuvre*, Oliver O’Donovan trans. (Paris: 2001), 23-54.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

as far as the martial metaphor can take us, for in actual fact, the forces of modern commerce thus defined—determinacy, universality, and romanticism—are always already integrated into the life-blood of society itself. If understood thus, political slavery was the consequence of jettisoning distinctly *Christian* moral and political concepts informing modern society for pagan or altogether unchristian ones. The descent into slavery is as rapid and thorough as the presumed escalation toward mastery. A morally corrupt society is susceptible to enslavement precisely because that society has undermined the fixtures making it “a society” as such. Determinacy, universality, and the romantic impulse are thus unmasked as ideals without substance, thrown into the light and exposed as “false spirits” actively unmaking the very goods that pursuing them seemed to have promised.

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